



# Providence Public School District: A Review

June 2019

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## Executive Summary

In May 2019, the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy led a review of the Providence Public School District (PPSD). We did so at the invitation of the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) Commissioner, Ms. Angélica Infante-Green, with the support of Governor Gina Raimondo and Mayor Jorge Elorza. The Partnership for Rhode Island funded the review.

We know from existing data that student achievement in Providence has been low for decades. Despite the hard work of countless teachers, administrators, and city employees, the latest RICAS scores show that, across the grade levels, a full 90 percent of students are not proficient in math, and a full 86 percent are not proficient in English Language Arts.

Creating strong academic outcomes for urban students, many of whom are economically challenged and speak English as a second language, is a challenge across the United States – not only in Providence. That said, as our report lays out, our team found unusually deep, systemic dysfunctions in PPCSD's education system that clearly, and very negatively, impact the opportunities of children in Providence.

Based on our direct observations and interviews, we found that:

- The great majority of students are not learning on, or even near, grade level.
- With rare exception, teachers are demoralized and feel unsupported.
- Most parents feel shut out of their children's education.
- Principals find it very difficult to demonstrate leadership.
- Many school buildings are deteriorating across the city, and some are even dangerous to students' and teachers' wellbeing.

Our review work included: interviews and focus groups with parents, school leaders, teachers, and leaders at all levels; visits to schools across the city; input from a team of independent local and national education experts; and a review of a broad range of documents and data provided by PPCSD and the Rhode Island Department of Education.

## Primary Findings

As you will note in the full report, there are many interrelated challenges across PPCSD. All of them point back to a central, structural deficiency:

Providence Public School District is overburdened with multiple, overlapping sources of governance and bureaucracy with no clear domains of authority and very little scope for transformative change. The resulting structures paralyze action, stifle innovation, and create dysfunction and inconsistency across the district. In the face of the current governance structure, stakeholders understandably expressed little to no hope for serious reform.

*The great majority of those we interviewed reported that the system neither worked well nor presented a coherent vision. They differed only in their explanations and examples. By far the most frequently stated view was that the system lacks clear delineations of authority, responsibility, and accountability.*

The consequences are multiple and seriously detrimental for the students in PPSD:

1. **PPSD has an exceptionally low level of academic instruction, including a lack of quality curriculum and alignment both within schools and across the district.** *Very little visible student learning was going on in the majority of classrooms and schools we visited – most especially in the middle and high schools. Multiple stakeholders emphasized that the state, district, and business community have very low expectations for student learning. Many district team members and community partners broke down in tears when describing this reality, which classroom observations verified.*
2. **School culture is broken, and safety is a daily concern for students and teachers.** *Our review teams encountered many teachers and students who do not feel safe in school. There is widespread agreement that bullying, demeaning, and even physical violence are occurring within the school walls at very high levels, particularly at the middle and high school levels. We were particularly struck by the high incidence of teacher and student absenteeism, which appears closely linked to school culture and safety.*
3. **Beyond these safety concerns, teachers do not feel supported.** *Educators report a lack of agency and input into decisions at their schools and classrooms. They are also unable to improve their teaching, with most citing a lack of professional development as a key factor. As a result, the review teams encountered meaningful gaps in student support. These gaps ranged from too few ELL-certified teachers and special education staff, to widespread difficulties with substitute teachers that leave students without subject-matter experts or coherent instruction. Many people noted that the collective bargaining agreement presents a systemic barrier to good teaching in two primary ways: limiting professional development opportunities and severely constraining the hiring and removal of teachers.*
4. **School leaders are not set up for success.** *This was a particularly striking finding, given how influential school leaders can be - even in some of the deeply challenged school systems in which our Institute has worked. Principals and other school leaders repeatedly*

reported that they are held accountable for results that they have neither resources nor authority to influence. Almost all of them are demoralized and defensive as a result. They all referenced the collective bargaining agreement as impeding their ability to exercise leadership and oversight in their schools. At the same time, we encountered some judgments and attitudes from individual principals that, based on what we know about effective schools, do not support higher student outcomes.

5. **Parents are marginalized and demoralized.** *In a system that is majority Latino, we expected to encounter multiple initiatives and programs that connected parents to the schools their children attend. That was simply not the case. The lack of parent input was striking on its own, but the widespread acceptance of this marginalization was of particular note.*

These realities run contrary to the necessary components of high-performing systems in the United States and around the world.

We note one particular success that consistently emerged across all constituencies: **Every group noted the presence of many devoted teachers, principals, and some district leaders who go above and beyond to support student success.** We hope that this core group of leaders and teachers provides the foundation upon which Rhode Island and Providence can build in the future.

We offer this report as a contribution to what we hope will be a positive and affirming process across the City of Providence to address the systemic challenges we highlight and to deliver greater educational opportunities to future generations of students who attend the city's schools.



## Introduction

In May 2019, the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy led a review of the Providence Public School District (PPSD). We did so at the invitation of the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) Commissioner, Ms. Angélica Infante-Green, with the support of Mayor Elorza and Governor Gina Raimondo. The Partnership for Rhode Island funded the review.

Our task was three-fold:

- To review the academic outcomes of the students enrolled in PPCSD, with some comparison to other districts (See Appendix A for full report).
- To visit and observe classrooms in multiple schools, and meet and converse with students, teachers, administrators, and members of the community (See Appendix B for the schedule).
- To hear the views of individuals and groups who hold or have held leadership positions within the PPCSD governance structure, including the Mayor (and former Mayor), the Superintendent (and former Superintendent), members of the PPCSD School Board, members of the City Council, and a wide variety of professionals involved in the district offices of PPCSD. Most discussions took place face to face, with a few reserved for phone conversations. For details of the on-site discussions, please see “Final District Site Schedule,” (Appendix C).

While we scrupulously report what our team heard and observed, it is very important to note that it was not within our purview to confirm, through further research, the veracity of what we were told by different leaders and district stakeholders. In some cases, inevitably, they reported on the same matter very differently (for example, on the success or lack of success of new disciplinary procedures). Readers may find themselves saying at one point or another, “That’s not what I think is correct” – but it is what we were told by the identified groups or individuals. There were multiple cases of near universal agreement across all stakeholders or amongst members of certain groups; readers may wish to take note of such cases as having a special weight.

Our review was designed to be based upon publicly available academic data and the judgements of individuals with whom we met. We did not, and do not, intend to make value judgments about what we found or what we heard; that is up to those who read the relevant sections of this report.<sup>1</sup> *We did seek consensus from each review team, each member of which has been given the opportunity to*

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<sup>1</sup> On a few subjects, such as per-pupil funding, we included public data to provide context. It is not, however, our role to comment upon the adequacy of the funding.

review the relevant sections of this document.<sup>2</sup> Where the review teams encountered divergent views amongst the interviewees, we have noted them as such.<sup>3</sup>

There are important limitations to this report.

- *Some members of leadership groups and individual stakeholders were not interviewed.* For instance, not all members of the City Council were available to meet during the allocated times. To maximize our availability, we arranged for post-review conference calls for a number of individuals – especially teachers – who had expressed the wish to be heard but had not had the opportunity.
- *We did not visit every school.* The school-visit schedule was designed by RIDE. A larger sample may have produced slightly different findings. This is true of any sampling from a larger group. We did review the academic results from the selected schools and were satisfied that there had been no “cherry picking” to guide the team into unrepresentative schools.
- *We did not include every statement made.* The review process must synthesize rather than transcribe. Consensus thus holds a special weight.

However, the review team made twelve school visits (30% of regular district public schools) and engaged in multiple, standards-normed classroom observations in each school. Additionally, the review team conducted interviews and focus groups with parents, almost two hundred teachers (10% of district teachers), and dozens of students.

The number of schools visited and teachers interviewed was well above the level of sampling required for statistical significance, and gives us confidence that what we saw and heard was not materially different than if we had enlarged the sample.

No personal identification is used in this report; individual comments are identified only with their public positions (as in “member of the School Board” or “school principals”). While our visits to schools and classrooms were a matter of public record, we have taken care not to link any comments, particular classrooms, and description of facilities, with any particular school, except when there was particular praise for a certain school.

The exception on identification applies to individuals who could speak only for themselves, and who were thus told that their comments would be on the record unless specifically withheld from the record. Those individuals were the Mayor, the Superintendent, the School Board President, the former Mayor, and the former Superintendent. In the case of the Superintendent, a brief, off-the-record conversation was held prior to the formal interview, but nothing from that conversation is included in this document.

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<sup>2</sup> The review team members were invited to comment upon the relevant sections and, if they disagreed substantively with its consensus findings, to compose a minority viewpoint under their own name which would be inserted in the document. All members of the public have, of course, the ability to respond publicly to the final report.

<sup>3</sup> Because we interviewed key stakeholders in groups, one group did not hear what another group had said. Where strong consensus on a given topic is indicated, it is because similar views were expressed *across groups*. This does not indicate that everyone would have endorsed the precise wording.

The review team conducted classroom observations with the use of the Instructional Practice Guide (IPG) in math and English Language Arts (ELA), and with the Massachusetts Observation Protocol in other subjects. The IPG is explicitly aligned to the CCSS (Common Core State Standards) that form the core of RI's own standards in math and ELA. (For an overview of the IPG, see [here](#).)

The Institute found a strong level of agreement about the strengths and challenges associated with the Providence Public School District. Different parties naturally emphasized different elements of the system, but we did not find fundamental disagreement.

One success consistently emerged across all constituencies:

- **Praise for certain principals, teachers, and district leaders.** *Every group* noted the presence of devoted teachers and principals who go above and beyond to support student success. Several groups noted the effectiveness of specific offices within the district, most notably the Teaching and Learning office.

Four challenges were articulated and observed again and again, across a majority of interviews and observations:

- **There is an exceptionally low bar for instruction and low expectations for students.** *Very little visible student learning was going on in the majority of classrooms and schools we visited – most especially in the middle and high schools.* Multiple stakeholders emphasized that the state, district, and business community have very low expectations for student learning. Many district team members and community partners broke down in tears when describing this reality, which classroom observations verified.
- **School culture is broken – particularly in secondary schools.** *Our review teams encountered many teachers and students who do not feel safe in school.* There is widespread agreement that bullying, demeaning, and even physical violence are occurring within the school walls at very high levels. Many participants cited the pressure to reduce suspensions as a causal factor.
- **Student support is insufficient.** *The review teams encountered meaningful gaps in student support.* These gaps ranged from too few English Language Learner (ELL) -certified teachers and special education staff, to widespread difficulties recruiting substitute teachers that leaves students without subject-matter experts. The consequences for student learning are evidenced in publicly available academic outcomes.
- **Governance comes from multiple individuals and institutions, with overlapping responsibilities. Vision suffers as a result.** *Very few participants thought the system worked well or posed a coherent vision.* They differed only in their explanations and remedies. While there was some finger pointing at individuals, by far the most frequently

stated view was that the system lacks clear delineations of authority, responsibility, and accountability.

Three additional, and perhaps related, challenges also emerged consistently.

- **The Collective Bargaining Agreement constrains schools.** *Many teachers, principals, community partners, district leaders, and members of governing bodies emphasized the negative effects of two components of the Collective Bargaining Agreement: the hiring/firing process and the paucity of professional development days.*
- **Racial equity is a low priority.** *We heard from district, state, and school staff, and from community partners, that the system inadequately addresses, and at times actively avoids addressing, the mis-match between students of color and their teachers. The current student body is comprised of close to 30% ELL students. Some 87% of students are economically disadvantaged; 65% of students are Latino.<sup>4</sup>*
- **The procurement process is a barrier to success.** *All conversations with community partners and district offices (with one exception) emphasized that the procurement process is a key deterrent to district success.*

We explore each strength and weakness as they pertain to specific school visits and interviews.

Because we know from international research that a strong school culture and a robust academic curriculum are signatures of high-performing systems, we begin with teaching and learning, and the context in which they occur - or don't. Student learning and wellbeing are at the core of an education system: the report that follows thus focuses strongly on these elements.

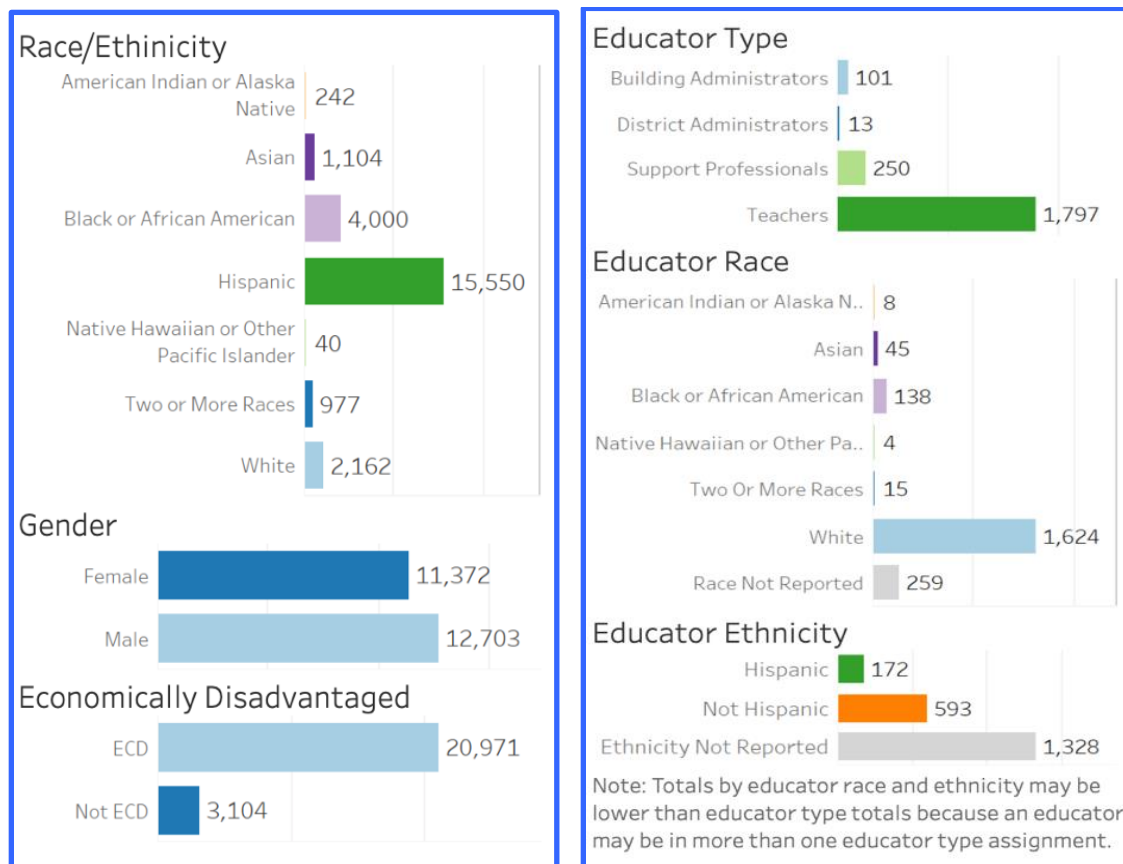
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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that there were a small number of dissenters from one or more of these judgments. A member of the school board stated: "It's not the money." On another topic, a member of the school board stated "I have heard people say that "we have had this influx of ELL students into the district" and I respectfully disagree; we have had diversity since forever; these folks have been here the entire time; we have failed to provide them the supports they need; the system has always failed."



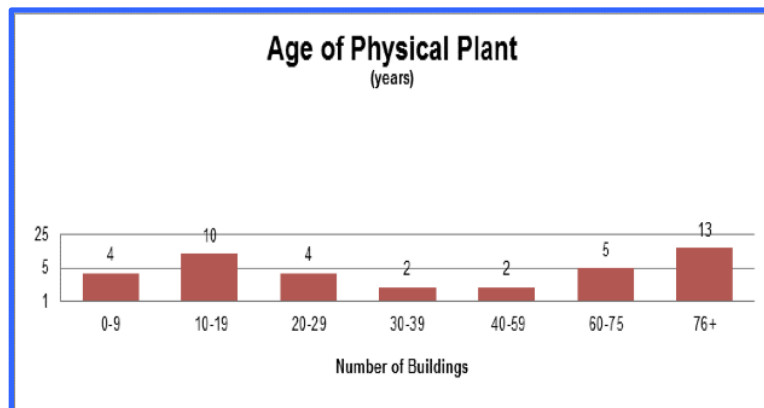
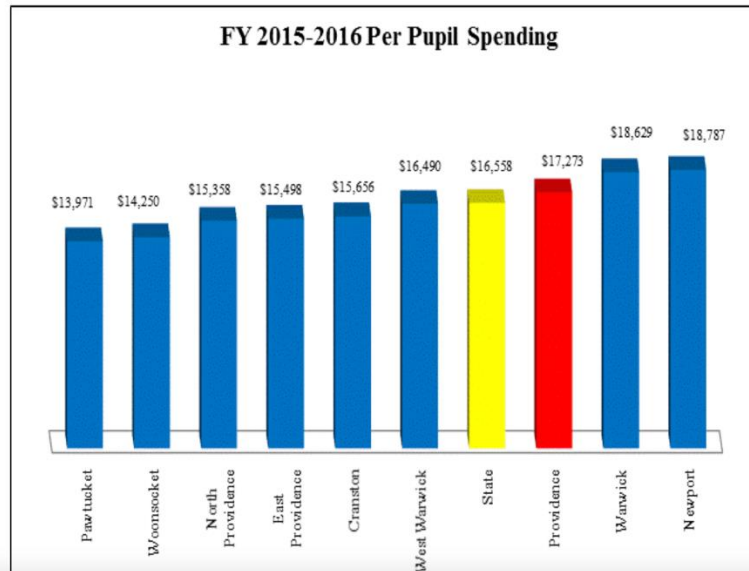
## Assessment of Academic Outcomes

We believe it is important to place the following report into the context of Providence Public Schools Department. While the charts and text below are only high-level indicators, they do constitute an important snapshot of the district.



Source: <https://reportcard.ride.ri.gov/DistrictSnapshot?DistCode=28>

According to the Rhode Island Department of Education the PPSP's per pupil cost for the 2015-2016 (latest comparable data) school year was \$17,273. The per pupil expenditures includes all funding sources and passthroughs for non-public schools, not just the local budget. The 2015-2016 PPSP's per pupil expenditures also exceeded the State average of \$16,558 for per pupil expenditures. Statewide spending data comparisons are available online at: <http://www.ride.ri.gov>



Source for both tables:

<https://www.providenceschools.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=237&dataid=22534&FileName=2018-2019%20Budget%20Book.pdf>

## *Providence Public School District: Analysis of Academic Outcomes*

Lead Researcher: Dr. Jay Plasman, Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy

The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy (the Institute) analyzed test score data for students in Providence, Rhode Island and two other comparison districts (Newark City, New Jersey and Worcester, Massachusetts). The Institute also examined comparative data for the state of Rhode Island as a whole to place Providence into context within the state. The analyses presented here focus on students in grades 3, 5, 8, and 10 in English Language Arts and grades 3, 5, 8, and algebra in mathematics during the school years of 2014-15 through 2017-18.

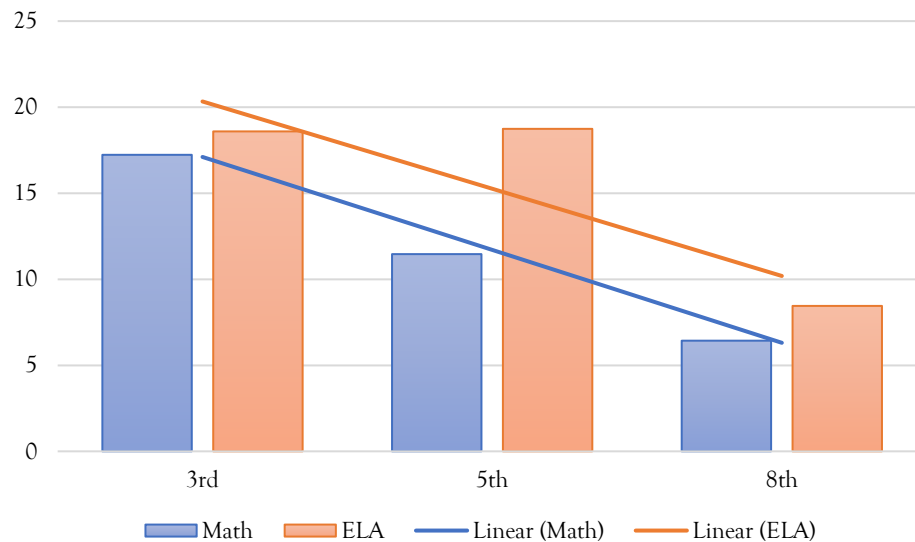
There are a few pieces of information that should be noted here and kept in mind. First, Rhode Island switched from the PARCC assessment to the RICAS assessment beginning in the 2017-18 school year. This makes comparisons over time more difficult to judge. Second, in the 2016-17 school year, 10<sup>th</sup> grade students in Providence did not complete the PARCC ELA assessment. Third, the new RICAS assessment does not include assessments for students beyond 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Instead, assessment results for high school are pulled from existing tests – the PSAT and SAT – to meet testing requirements. The RICAS assessment was put in place in an effort to reduce the amount of time spent testing in class and to ideally help relieve some of the burden on teachers. The test itself pulls items both from PARCC and MCAS, which is the Massachusetts state assessment.

### *The State of Providence Education*

The Institute began the analysis of achievement data with a focus on the district of Providence. We identified changes in rates of proficiency as students progress through school as well as changes in proficiency rates over time for both math and ELA.

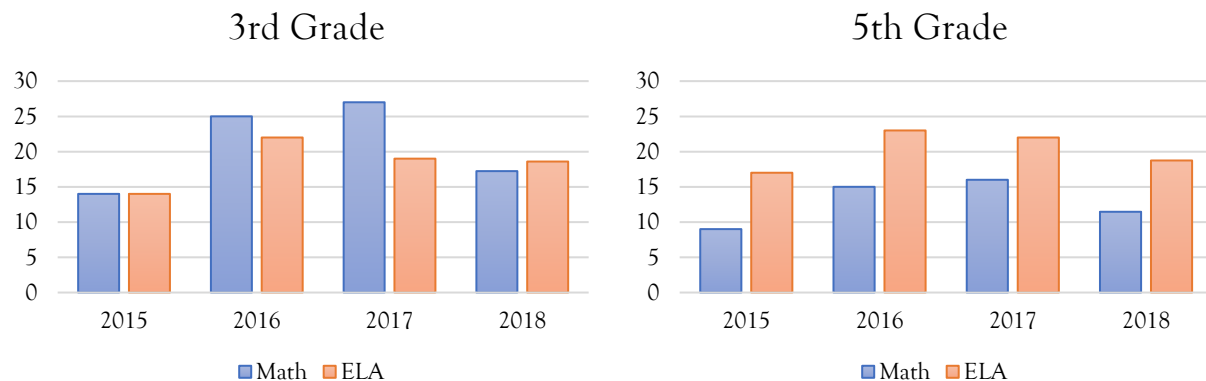
Below, figure 1 presents the changes in proficiency rates by grade level from the 2017-18 school year when students completed the RICAS assessment. *One of the first points to highlight is that every grade exhibited proficiency rates lower than 20% in both math and ELA – fewer than one out of every five students.* Proficiency rates in ELA were slightly higher than math in all grades, but not by much. Second, the trendlines indicate a fairly steep decline in rates of proficiency between 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. For example, in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade math, just over 17% of students achieved proficiency while just only slightly more than 6% of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students achieved proficiency in math. This brings up a final point to emphasize: there is a sizeable and noticeable dropoff in proficiency rates in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade in both math and ELA.

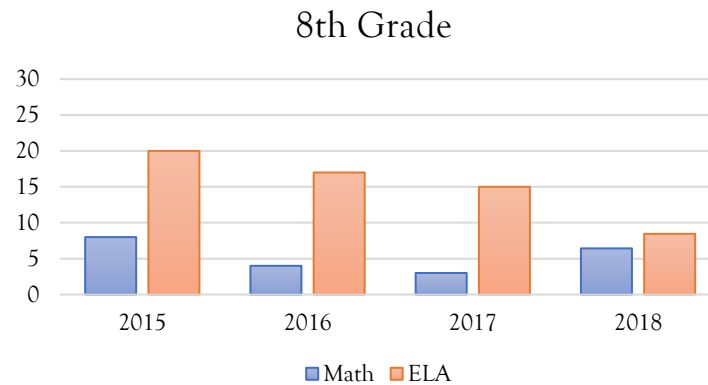
Figure 1. Providence Proficiency Rates by Grade – 2017-18



This drop-off is not unique to RICAS and the 2017-18 school year. In every year since the 2014-15 school year, 8<sup>th</sup> grade students achieve proficiency at lower rates than 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders as shown in figure 2. Not only that, but there was only one grade in one year in which students reached proficiency rates greater than 25% - 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students in the 2016-17 school year.

Figure 2. Providence Proficiency Rates Over Time





### *Providence Comparisons*

Due to the change from the PARCC to RICAS just prior to the 2017-18 school year, it was necessary to identify multiple sites with which to compare Providence. First, Providence is compared to Newark City – which also administered the PARCC assessment during these years – for school years 2014-15 through 2016-17. For the 2017-18 school year, Providence is compared to Worcester, which administered the MCAS – a test comparable to the RICAS assessment. The state of Rhode Island is present throughout. Newark serves as an appropriate pre-RICAS comparison because of a relatively similar size and some demographic similarities as Providence. The same can be said of Worcester as a RICAS comparison site. Table 1 below shows a breakdown of key demographic statistics for each of the comparison sites. Note that no two districts are the same: *The Institute did not expect to find identical matches for PPSD, but rather chose to identify sites for which certain sub-populations were relatively comparable in each of the identified categories below.* In general, we think the most indicative comparative results are the trend lines across years and grade-level results, rather than the absolute outcomes, although these are clearly important in their own right as representing the academic achievement of PPSD students.

Table 1. *Summary Statistics for Comparison Sites*

	Providence	Rhode Island	Newark	Worcester
<b>Economically Disadvantaged</b>	87.1%	46.7%	79%	57.9%
<b>Limited English Proficiency</b>	27.9%	8.8%	10.5%	32.8%
<b>Special Education</b>	15%	15.2%	16.6%	19.4%
<b>Black</b>	16.6%	8.6%	42.9%	16.3%
<b>Hispanic</b>	64.6%	25.3%	47.2%	42.9%
<b>White</b>	9%	57.7%	8.4%	29.6%
<b>Total Students</b>	24,075	142,949	36,112	25,415

The Institute relied on Newark to provide context from previous years, though we did not delve deeply into the subgroup comparisons with Newark considering the change to the RICAS assessment. Therefore, we rely on comparisons with Worcester when examining the breakdowns by student subgroup. In this regard, there is another important point to note. In the first year of a new assessment, it is not uncommon to see a dip in performance as students adjust to the new test.

Below is a summary of the key takeaways from the analyses.

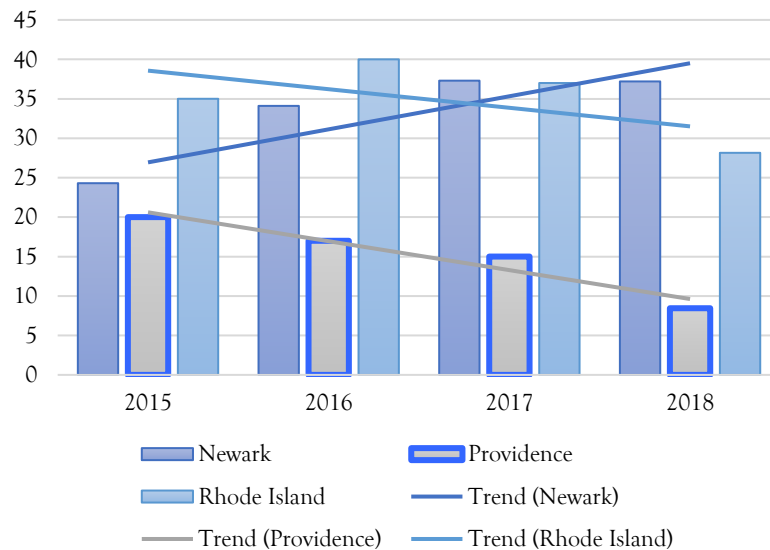
1. Students in Providence achieve proficiency at very low rates (only 3<sup>rd</sup> graders in 2016-17 reached a proficiency rate of greater than 25%) and 8<sup>th</sup> grade performance has consistently been lower than other grades over time.
2. Providence schools exhibited lower test scores in both ELA and math across all grades when compared to the state of Rhode Island. This was the case both pre- and post-RICAS.
3. Providence schools scored lower than comparable districts (Newark City and Worcester) in both ELA and math in all grades across all years examined.
4. While most grades in Providence saw relatively stable proficiency rates over time in ELA, 8<sup>th</sup> grade appears to be an especially difficult time as proficiency rates steadily decreased over time.
5. 8<sup>th</sup> grade also appears to be a particularly difficult time for students in mathematics, as this was the grade with lowest proficiency rates in Providence over each of the four years.
6. Disadvantaged students (e.g., under-represented minorities, economically disadvantaged students, limited English proficiency students, and students with disabilities) not only had substantially lower proficiency rates than their more advantaged peers in Providence, but they also achieved proficiency at noticeably lower rates than those same disadvantaged groups in a comparable district (Worcester, MA).

### Analysis

In absolute and comparative terms (when compared to the state and to two cities with sub-groups that include elements present in PPSD: Newark, NJ, and Worcester, MA), the proficiency rates of PPSD students start low and decline in middle and high school.

In English Language Arts (ELA), for instance, students' proficiency rates were on par with Newark, NJ in third grade. By 5<sup>th</sup> grade, the gap between Newark and Providence became more pronounced. In eighth grade, the gap widened still further: Providence students' proficiency dropped from 18.7% in fifth grade to only 8.5% in eighth, and by 2017, the gap between Providence and Newark in 8<sup>th</sup> grade was greater than 22 percentage points. Interestingly, the achievement gaps between these two districts has grown each year, and in each grade.

Figure 3. 8<sup>th</sup>-Grade ELA Trends Over Time\*

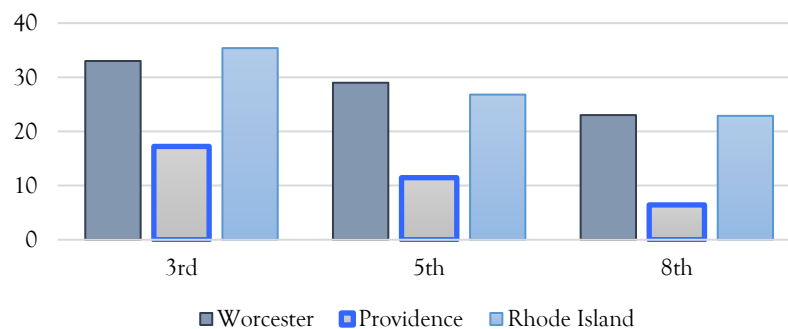


\*Rhode Island and Providence used the RICAS assessment in 2017-18, while Newark used the PARCC

Figure 3 above presents the trendlines for ELA in Newark, Providence, and Rhode Island over the past four years. It is clear that Providence is well below both Newark and the state of Rhode Island; only Newark presents a positive overall trend in ELA. However, the negative trend in Providence is steeper, indicating that students are declining more quickly there than they are in the state of Rhode Island as a whole.

One positive development is an uptick in 8<sup>th</sup>-grade math in 2018. The result, however, is still the lowest of the 3-8<sup>th</sup> grade math assessments, and even with this slight uptick, *more than 93% of the 8<sup>th</sup>-graders in Providence were not proficient in mathematics*. Furthermore, students in Providence continue to achieve proficiency at substantially lower rates than do their peers in Worcester and across the state of Rhode Island. These struggles are evident in every grade examined.

Figure 4. RICAS Math Proficiencies by Grade, All Students, 2018\*



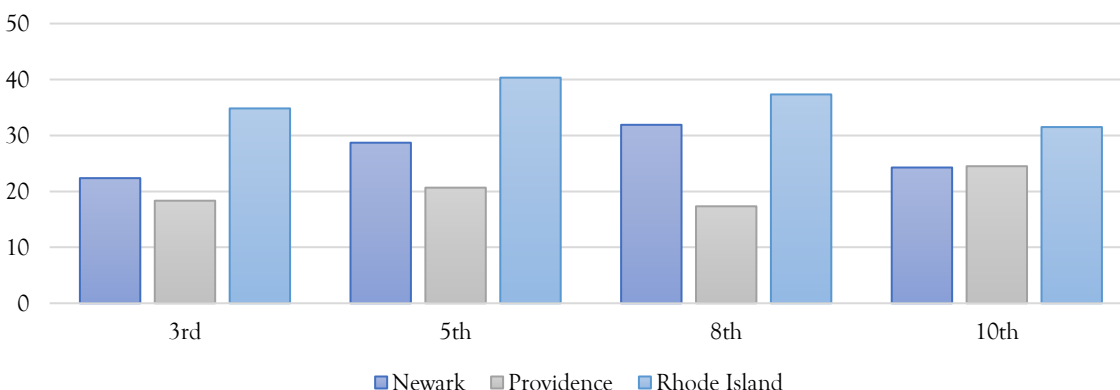
\*Note: The RICAS assessment did not include an algebra test in 8<sup>th</sup> grade

The academic outcomes of students in Providence should be seen as the critical backdrop to the remainder of this report.

### *English Language Arts: Trend Comparisons*

To provide historical context for Providence schools, the Institute examined the PARCC scores in grades 3, 5, 8, and 10 in English Language Arts (ELA). Proficiency rates were compared to those of students in Newark City, New Jersey and the full state of Rhode Island.

Figure 5. PARCC ELA Proficiencies by Grade, All Students, Averaged Across 2015-2017



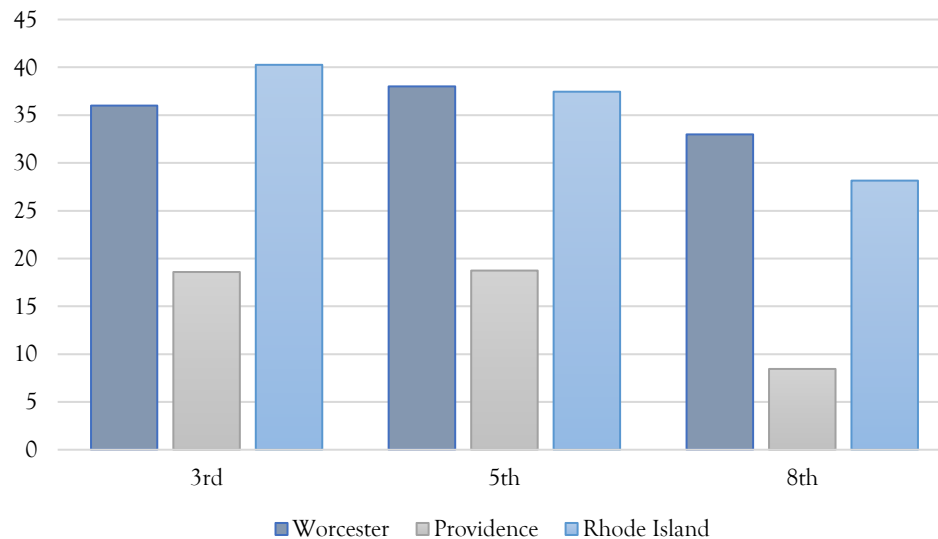
\*Note: 10<sup>th</sup> grade ELA data was not available for Rhode Island in 2017

Figure 5 above presents the results of the analysis. Proficiency rates have been averaged across each of the three years from 2014-15 to 2016-17 to provide an overall look at how students performed. As shown, Providence schools scored lower than Rhode Island as a state in every grade. Additionally they scored lower than Newark schools in all grades except 10<sup>th</sup>, when they were nearly equivalent. Keep in mind that 10<sup>th</sup> grade scores in Providence include only the 2014-15 and 2015-16 school years as there was no 10<sup>th</sup> grade test in 2016-17. **In Providence, 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELA exhibited the lowest proficiency rates, averaging only about 17% proficiency.** This is 20 percentage points lower than Rhode Island, and almost 15 percentage points lower than Newark. In no grade in Providence did more than 25% of students achieve proficiency.

Figure 6 below presents the comparison results for student proficiency rates on the 2017-18 RICAS/MCAS assessments. In Providence, students in grades 3 and 5 exhibited similar rates of proficiency (18.6% and 18.7%, respectively) as they did on the PARCC assessment. However, there was a severe decrease in proficiency for 8<sup>th</sup> grade students as proficiency rates dropped from 18.7% in 5<sup>th</sup> grade to only 8.5% in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. This was nearly 22 percentage points lower than the state of Rhode Island and 24.5 percentage points lower than Worcester. **8<sup>th</sup> grade proficiency rates were the lowest in each site, but those in Providence were by far the lowest.** While students in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades in Providence did score proficient rates similar to what they had scored on PARCC, these rates were still substantially lower than those across the state of Rhode Island and in Worcester.



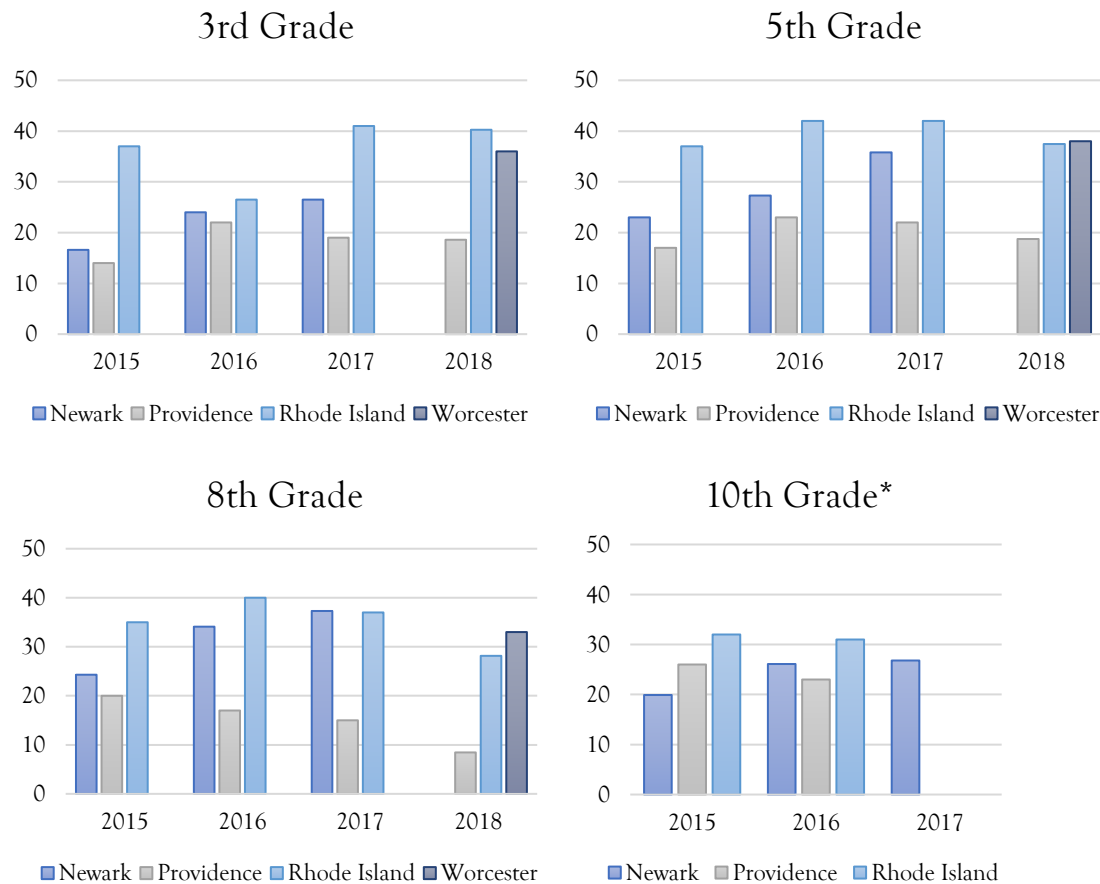
Figure 6. RICAS ELA Proficiencies by Grade, All Students, 2018\*



\*Note: Rhode Island switched from the PARCC to the RICAS assessment beginning in the 2017-18 school year. 10<sup>th</sup> grade students did not complete the participate assessment. RICAS is comparable to the MCAS assessment in Massachusetts

The Institute next explored how proficiency rates changed over time. Figure 7 presents these changes by grade. In examining the panels below, keep in mind that Newark, Providence and Rhode Island PARCC data is presented for 2014-15 through 2016-17, while Worcester, Providence, and Rhode Island MCAS/RICAS data is presented for the 2017-18 school year. Each panel contains a single grade with the proficiency rates for each site in a given year. In Providence, the proficiency rates across all four years remained relatively stable in both 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades. In 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, the proficiency rates were relatively similar to those in Newark in each year. By 5<sup>th</sup> grade, the gap between Newark and Providence became a bit more pronounced. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, this gap was quite substantial. Interestingly, the gap between these two sites grew over time in each grade. **By 2017, the gap between Providence and Newark in 8<sup>th</sup> grade was greater than 22 percentage points.** Another interesting point about the 8<sup>th</sup> grade proficiency rates is that they steadily decreased over time, and reached a low of only 8.5% proficiency in 2018. It is difficult to make any conclusions for the high school proficiency rates as there were only two years of data for Providence and the state of Rhode Island. However, the proficiency rates for each of the comparison sites were much more closely clustered and there were no longer the substantial gaps as seen in earlier grades.

Figure 7. ELA Proficiency Rates Over Time, by Grade, PARCC (2014-15 to 2016-17) and MCAS/RICAS (2017-18).



\*Note: Rhode Island did not include scores for 10<sup>th</sup> grade in 2017 and high school students were not tested with RICAS in 2018

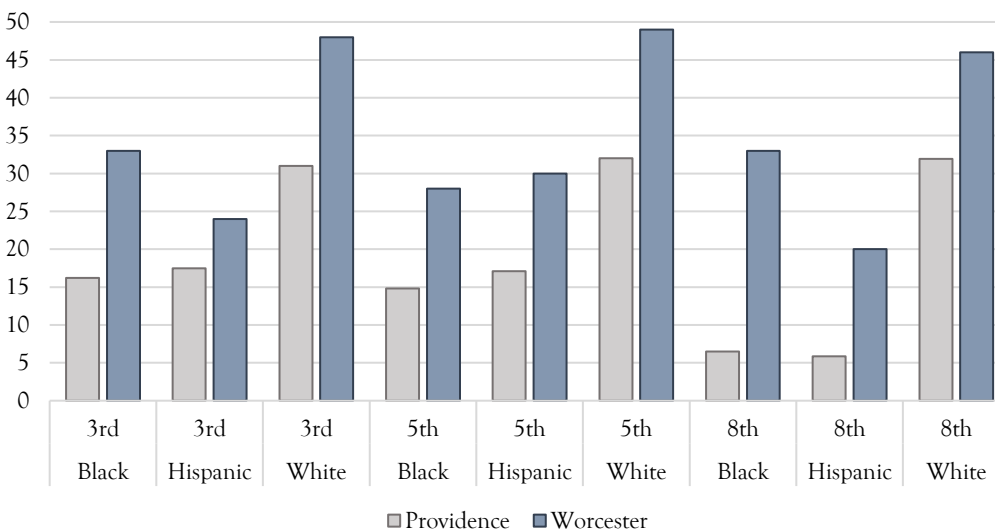
### English Language Arts: Subgroup Comparisons

The Institute's subgroup analyses focus on the differences between Worcester and Providence. Subgroups of interest include students in the following groups: Black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, limited English proficiency, and special education. Test scores from Worcester are from the MCAS assessment and test scores from Providence are from the RICAS assessment. These assessments are comparable in interpretation of their scores.

The Institute first turned to an examination of differences across the two sites by race/ethnicity. Figure 8 below presents these findings. The first point to highlight is that students in Providence, regardless of race/ethnicity, were proficient at substantially lower rates than their Worcester counterparts. While White students in Providence achieved proficiency at approximately the same rate across grade levels, Black and Hispanic students were substantially less likely to reach proficiency in 8<sup>th</sup> grade (only 6.5% of Black students and 5.9% of Hispanic students) than they were in either elementary grade. The most glaring difference between Providence and Worcester is in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, where Black students in Providence had proficiency rates nearly 27 percentage points lower than

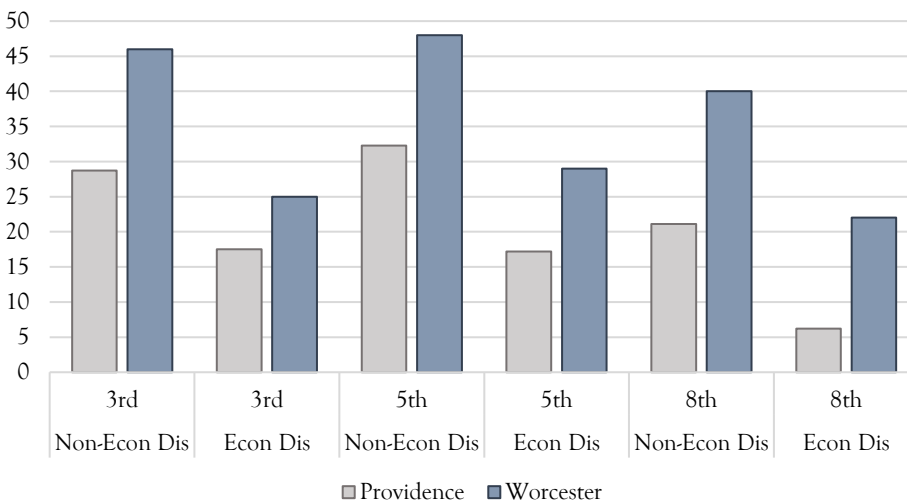
Black students in Worcester. 8<sup>th</sup> grade Hispanic students in Providence had proficiency rates 14 percentage points lower than those in Worcester, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade White students in Providence also had proficiency rates 14 percentage points lower than those in Worcester. **The main takeaway from this analysis is that Black and Hispanic students in Providence experienced a serious drop in performance in 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELA that was nowhere near as evident in Worcester, and these minority students performed substantially lower than their white peers in Providence across all grades.**

Figure 8. ELA Proficiency Rates by Race/Ethnicity, by Grade, 2017-18



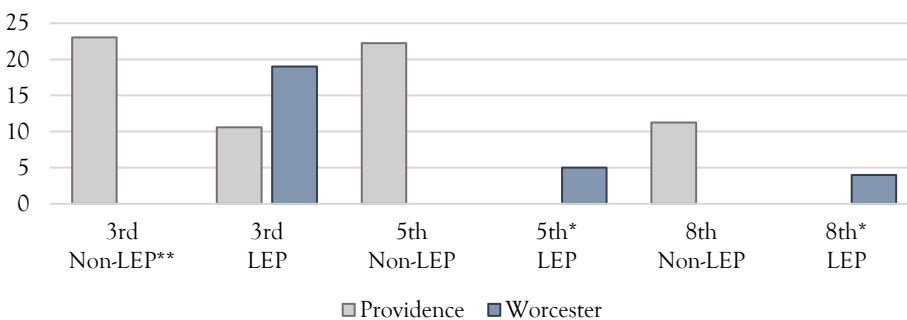
A similar pattern emerged for economically disadvantaged students. As shown below in Figure 9, **economically disadvantaged students experienced decreasing rates of proficiency as they progressed through school, with a low of only 6.2% proficiency by the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.** As with race/ethnicity, all groups of students in Providence – regardless of economic disadvantage – reached proficiency at substantially lower rates than their peers in Worcester. These differences peaked in 8<sup>th</sup> grade at which point economically disadvantaged students in Providence reached proficiency at a rate nearly 16 percentage points lower than those in Worcester, and non-economically disadvantaged students in Providence (21.1% proficiency) in 8<sup>th</sup> grade reached proficiency at a rate nearly 19 percentage points lower than Worcester. Furthermore, there was a very evident gap between economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students that peaked in 5<sup>th</sup> grade (15.1 percentage point difference) and remained quite large in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade (14.9 percentage point difference). This gap was also evident in Worcester, but economically disadvantaged students reached proficiency at higher rates than their Providence peers in every grade.

Figure 9. ELA Proficiency Rates by Economic Disadvantage, by Grade, 2017-18



Due to data limitations, it was difficult to draw strong conclusions from the analysis focusing on Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students. First, Worcester did not report proficiency rates for non-LEP students. This made comparisons with Providence non-LEP students impossible. Second, with the 2017-18 RICAS implementation, Providence also implemented a practice of not reporting proficiency rates for subgroups for which fewer than 5% of the population achieved proficiency, as was the case for LEP students in both the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. With these caveats in mind, there are a few conclusions to highlight which are observable in figure 10. **First, there again appeared to be a significant decline in proficiency rates in Providence in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade for all students.** Second, the largest gap in Providence between LEP and non-LEP students was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, considering fewer than 5% of LEP students were proficient at that time. Finally, there was a substantial gap in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade between LEP students in Providence and LEP students in Worcester. In fact, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade LEP students in Worcester achieved proficiency at a rate only 4 percentage points lower than 3<sup>rd</sup> grade non-LEP students in Providence.

Figure 10. ELA Proficiency Rates by LEP Status, by Grade, 2017-18



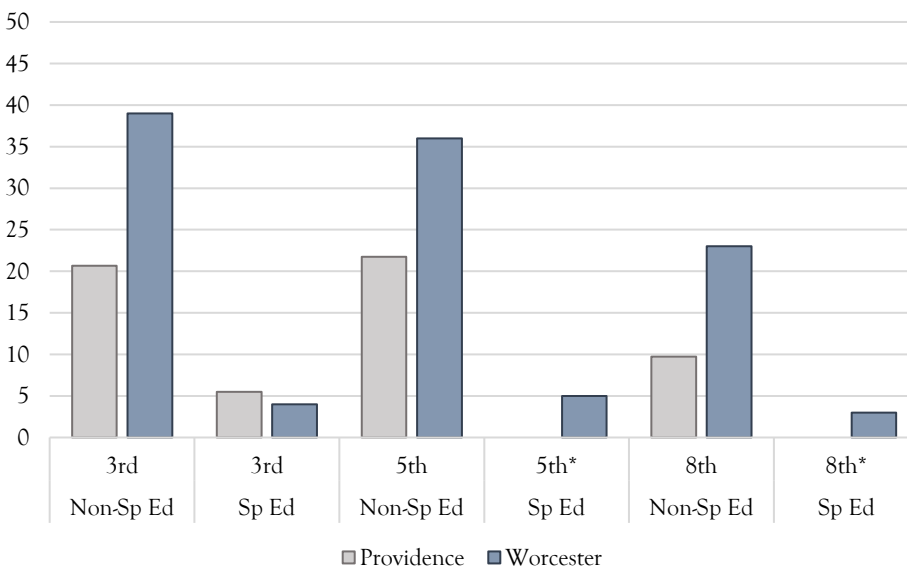
\*Data not reported for subgroups with lower than 5% proficiency rates

\*\*Worcester did not report proficiency rates for non-LEP students

The final subgroup of interest was students with disabilities. There was again the issue that Providence did not report proficiency rates in cases where less than 5% of the subgroup achieved proficiency, as was the case in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. As shown in figure 11 below, students receiving

special education services performed substantially worse than their non-special education peers in both sites in every grade. The differences in proficiency rates of special education students between Providence and Worcester were not very stark as they were extremely low in both locations. **The biggest gap within Providence existed in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, at which time 21.8% of non-special education students achieved proficiency while fewer than 5% of special education students were able to do so.**

Figure 11. ELA Proficiency Rates by Special Education Status, by Grade, 2017-18



\*Data not reported for subgroups with lower than 5% proficiency rates

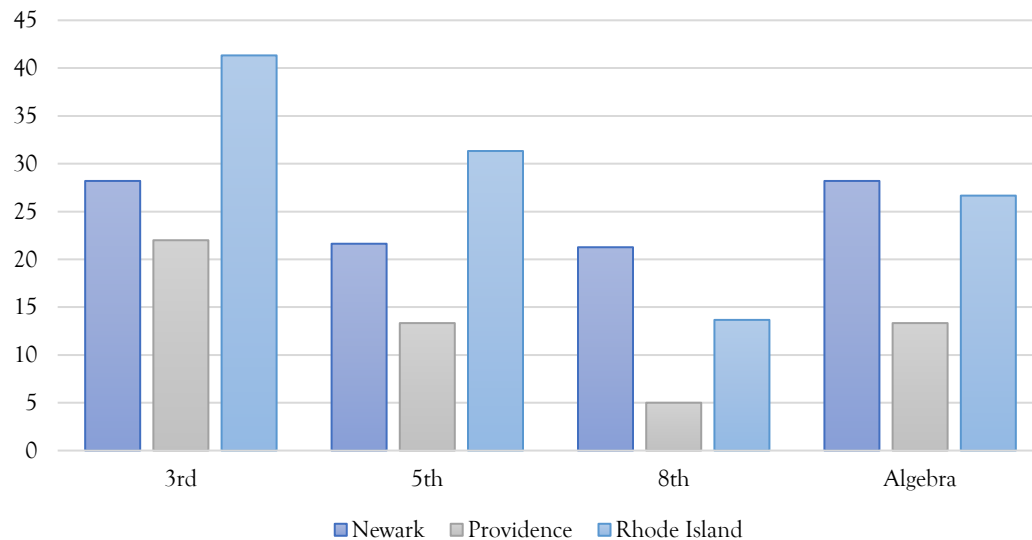
### Mathematics: Trend Comparisons

As with ELA, the Institute examined the historical patterns of performance in mathematics in Providence. The Institute included the same time frames (PARCC for the years 2014-15 through 2016-17, and MCAS/RICAS in 2017-18) and locations (Newark, Providence, and Rhode Island for PARCC, and Worcester, Providence, and Rhode Island for MCAS/RICAS) as the ELA analyses. Using PARCC data, algebra proficiency rates were identified. These rates included students in grades ranging from 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>. As with ELA, the Institute first explored the averaged PARCC scores (figure 12) followed by the one existing year of MCAS/RICAS scores (figure 13).

Looking at figure 12 below, there are a number of trends to mention. First, Providence exhibited lower proficiency rates than both Newark and the state of Rhode Island across each grade. Second, in each location, students steadily decreased in proficiency rates from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and then experienced a jump in proficiency rates in algebra. As in ELA, 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in Providence achieved proficiency at very low rates. **Only 5% of Providence 8<sup>th</sup> graders were proficient in math, which is by far the lowest of any grade in Providence.** This is 16.3 percentage points lower than 8<sup>th</sup> graders in Newark and represents the largest gap in any grade between Providence and Newark. Interestingly, the largest gap between Providence and the rest of Rhode Island existed in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade

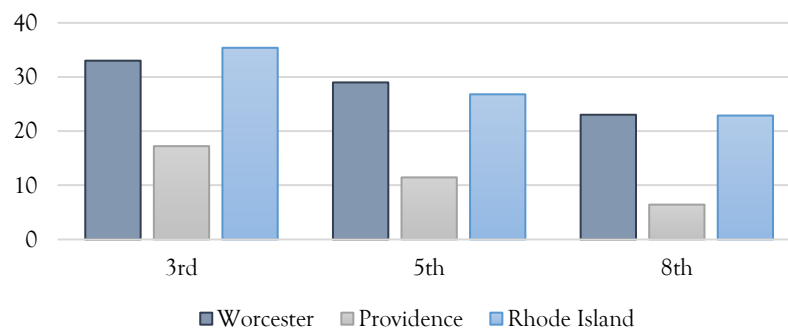
where there was a greater than 19 percentage point gap. As in ELA, students in Providence did not achieve at or above 25% proficiency in any grade.

Figure 12. PARCC Math Proficiencies by Grade, All Students, Averaged Across 2015-2017



Prior to discussing the comparisons with Worcester, it is again important to point out that students in Providence and the rest of Rhode Island did not take RICAS tests in high school or for the specific subject of algebra. However, the comparisons with the MCAS assessment remain valid as the tests are very similar. Turning now to the analysis of the comparison with Worcester in the 2017-18 school year, the patterns are nearly identical to those mentioned above in the comparison with Newark. Figure 13 shows steadily decreasing proficiency rates in each site across the three grades, with 8<sup>th</sup> grade proficiency rates the lowest in each location. **Again, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade proficiency rates in Providence at 6.4% were by far the lowest, and were substantially lower than both Worcester (16.5 percentage point difference) and the state of Rhode Island (16.4 percentage point difference).** The largest gap with Worcester, however, was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, when students in Providence (11.5% proficient) achieved proficiency rates nearly 18 percentage points lower. The largest gap with the rest of Rhode Island was observed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade when 17.2% of students in Providence met proficiency and 35.4% of students in Rhode Island met proficiency.

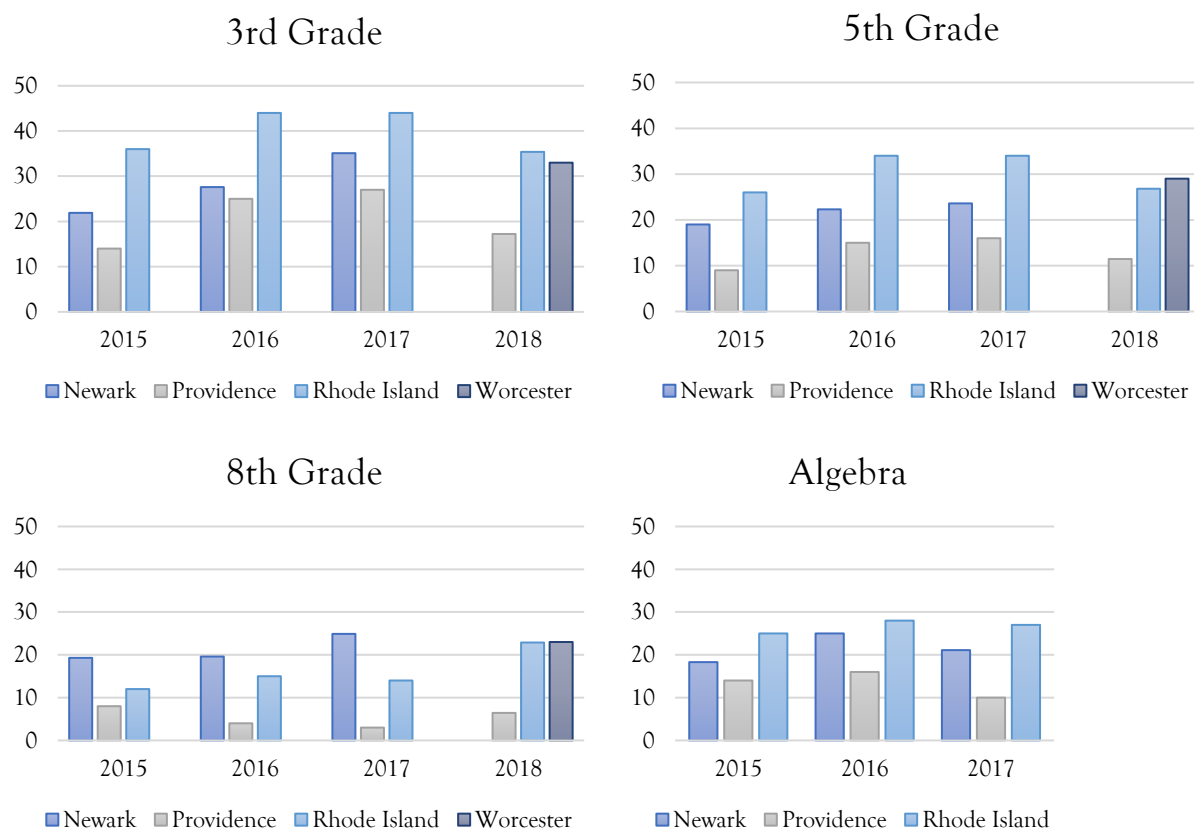
Figure 13. RICAS Math Proficiencies by Grade, All Students, 2018\*



\*Note: The RICAS assessment did not include an algebra test in either 8<sup>th</sup> grade or high school

Figure 14 presents the mathematics proficiency rates over time disaggregated by school year, with the individual grades presented in separate panels. Again, it is important to keep in mind that the 2014-15 through 2016-17 data is from the PARCC assessment, while the 2017-18 data is from the MCAS/RICAS assessments. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and 5<sup>th</sup> grade panels in each of Newark, Providence, and Rhode Island, proficiency rates were trending upward prior to the switch to the RICAS assessment. In 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, Providence students achieved proficiency at rates relatively comparable to Newark, though still noticeably lower than Rhode Island. By the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, the differences were starker between Providence and the rest of Rhode Island as well as Newark. In 2018, the proficiency rates for both Providence and Rhode Island dropped in both 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Algebra proficiency rates across each of the three sites were quite low, with none of the sites meeting 30% proficiency in any of the years. However, Providence students were particularly low performing as proficiency rates did not top 20% in any of the years. 8<sup>th</sup> grade was again when the lowest performance was observed in Providence, with glaringly low performance in all four years as proficiency rates never topped 10%. **In 2017, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade proficiency rate in Providence dipped as low as 3%, with a slight increase in 2018 with the RICAS assessment up to 6.4%.** Across every year in every grade, Providence students achieved proficiency at rates substantially lower than every other comparable site, and as with ELA, students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade appear to consistently struggle over time.

Figure 14. Math Proficiency Rates Over Time, by Grade, PARCC (2014-15 to 2016-17) and MCAS/RICAS (2017-18).

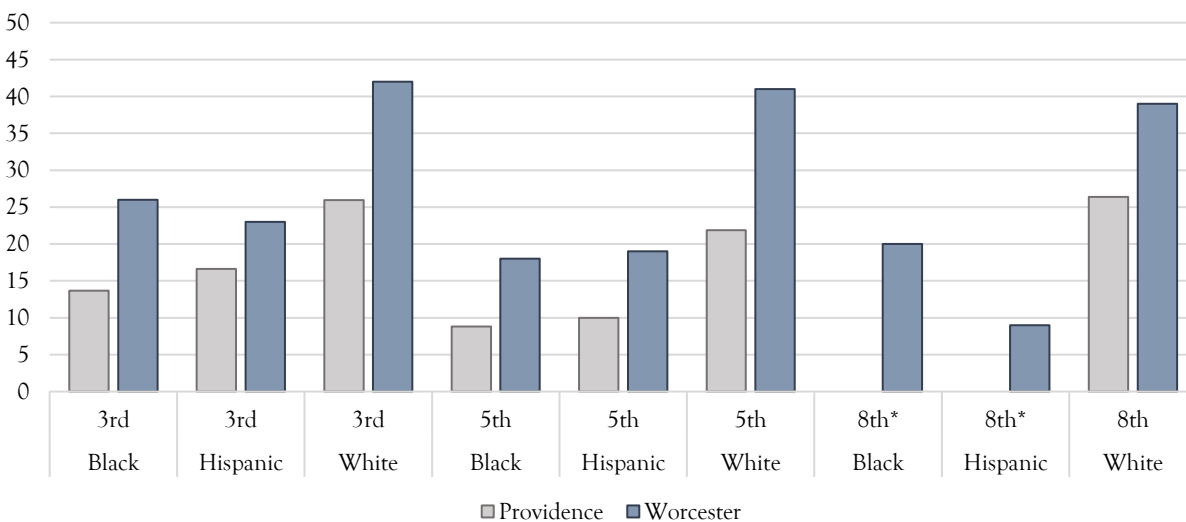


### Mathematics: Subgroup Comparisons

The Institute limited the subgroup analyses to the 2017-18 school year to take advantage of the most recent data and to focus on the assessment in use in Providence – the RICAS. We again focused on a comparison with Worcester, MA which used the MCAS assessment – the test upon which the RICAS was modeled – in that year.

Figure 15 highlights the differences between Providence and Worcester as broken out by race/ethnicity and grade. In each grade, Black and Hispanic students reached proficiency at substantially lower rates than did White students in both Providence and Worcester. Also in each grade, students in Providence performed noticeably worse than students in Worcester. Some of the most drastic differences were for White students, where the gap between Providence (21.9% proficient) and Worcester (41% proficient) peaked in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. **Within Providence, the gap between White students and both Black and Hispanic students was most glaring in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. White students achieved proficiency at 26.4%, while both Black and Hispanic students did not meet the 5% proficiency threshold.** 8<sup>th</sup> grade also represented the largest gap between Black students in Providence (< 5% proficiency) and Black students in Worcester (20% proficiency). A final point to highlight is that proficiency rates for Black and Hispanic students in Providence steadily decreased by grade, with the low-point observed in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Figure 15. Math Proficiency Rates by Race/Ethnicity, by Grade, 2017-18



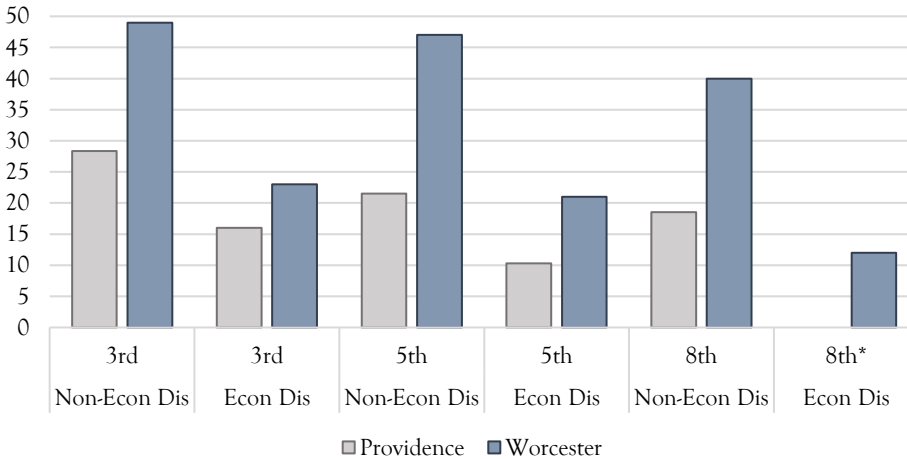
\*Data not reported for subgroups with lower than 5% proficiency rates

The next set of analyses focused on economic disadvantage status. Figure 16 presents the comparison for students in Providence and Worcester who were and were not identified as economically disadvantaged. The first point to note is that once again, 8<sup>th</sup> grade had the lowest proficiency rates for all groups. Second, students in Providence consistently performed lower than students in Worcester. Additionally, there was a larger gap between non-economically disadvantaged students across the two sites than between economically disadvantaged students. **The gap between non-economically disadvantaged students in Providence and Worcester was as large as 25.5 percentage**



points in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Within Providence, the gap between economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students remained relatively consistent around 11-15 percentage points across each of the three observed grades.<sup>5</sup>

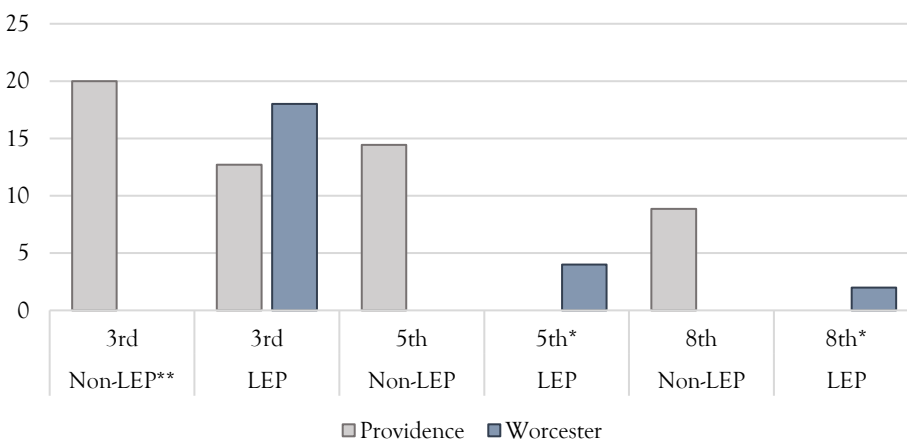
Figure 16. Math Proficiency Rates by Economic Disadvantage, by Grade, 2017-18



\*Data not reported for subgroups with lower than 5% proficiency rates

As in our ELA analysis, it was difficult to make specific conclusions for LEP status students because Worcester did not report non-LEP student proficiency rates and Providence did not report observed rates for subgroups with lower than 5% proficiency. However, it was possible to identify clear existence of gaps between LEP and non-LEP students in Providence. Figure 17 below presents the comparisons. The gap between LEP and non-LEP students in Providence was the largest in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. **Regarding LEP students in Providence, in no year did their proficiency rates exceed 13%, and in both 5<sup>th</sup> grade and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, their proficiency rates were sub-5%.**

Figure 17. Math Proficiency Rates by LEP Status, by Grade, 2017-18



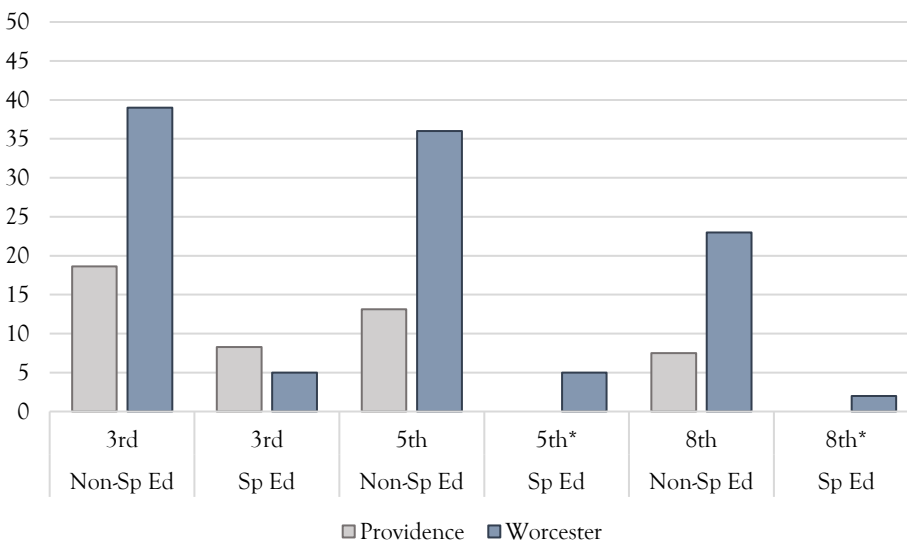
\*Data not reported for subgroups with lower than 5% proficiency rates

\*\*Worcester did not report proficiency rates for non-LEP students

<sup>5</sup> It is not possible to determine the exact gap in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, but a 15 percentage point gap would imply a proficiency rate of approximately 3.5% for economically disadvantaged students.

The final analysis explored differences between Providence and Worcester by special education status. Figure 18 highlights the results of this analysis. The most notable gaps between Providence and Worcester were evident for students not receiving special education services. In 5<sup>th</sup> grade, this gap was as large as 23 percentage points. Students receiving special education services did not surpass 9% proficiency in any grade in either Providence or Worcester. In Providence these proficiency rates were under 5% in both 5<sup>th</sup> grade and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. **Though it was not possible to identify the exact gap between special education and non-special education students every year in Providence, it is possible to state that all students had very low proficiency rates and that (as is generally the case) special education students consistently performed worse than non-special education students in every grade.**

Figure 18. Math Proficiency Rates by Special Education Status, by Grade, 2017-18



\*Data not reported for subgroups with lower than 5% proficiency rates

## PPSD School Site Visits Classroom Instruction and School Culture May 20 – May 24, 2019

### Summary

The review teams visited four elementary, four middle, and four high schools. Because middle schools were divided between the two teams, we include findings from middle schools with their respective teams.

The review team for elementary (and some middle) schools was comprised of the following members:

- Tracy Lafreniere, North Smithfield, Reading Specialist (and RI 2016 Teacher of the Year)
- Karla Vigil, EduLeaders of Color, Co-Founder and Chief Connector, District and School Design & Senior Associate at the Center for Collaborative Education
- Jeremy Sencer, Math Specialist PPSD
- Sarah Friedman, The Learning Community, School Co-Director
- Michelle Davidson, Parent Advocate and Community Member
- Crystal Spring, Johns Hopkins University Research Fellow

The review team for elementary (and some middle) school interviews and focus groups:

- Dr. Barbara Mullen, Center for Leadership and Educational Equity, Director – Learning Leader Network and former Special Education Director for Houston Independent School District
- Phil DeCecco, Retired Providence School Counselor
- Dr. Angela Watson, Johns Hopkins University, OR Mr. Al Passarella, Johns Hopkins University

The review team for high school (and some middle school) classrooms was comprised of:

- Dr. Heather Hill, Annenberg Institute at Brown University, Professor
- Paige Clausius Parks, M.Ed., Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, Senior Policy Analyst
- Victor Capellan, Central Falls School District, Superintendent
- Nikos Giannopoulos, Beacon Charter School, Educator and Rhode Island 2017 Teacher of the Year
- Ramona Santos, Providence Public School Parent
- Kelly Siegel-Stechler, Johns Hopkins University

The review team for interviews and focus groups in high schools (and some middle schools) was comprised of:

- Dr. Wayne Montague, Winn Residential Community Relations, Director
- Victoria Gailliard Garrick, William M. Davies Jr., Career and Technical High School, retired director
- Dr. Angela Watson, Johns Hopkins University Senior Research Fellow

In every school, the review team observed classrooms and conducted focus groups and interviews with administrators, teachers, and students.

School visits included classroom observations, and interviews and focus groups with students, teachers, and administrators.

The review team noted that, in every school, students and teachers named specific individuals who cared about the wellbeing and academic progress of students. Additionally, many schools have put new plans in place to bolster students' social and emotional learning. One school in particular was nicely appointed and friendly.

However, the review team observed, and interviewees validated, the following high-level concerns:

### *Elementary Schools*

- **The instructional rigor is too low.** In the majority of classrooms, students were insufficiently challenged. Since classroom-level instruction is a key determinant of students' short- and long-term success, we focus this report first and foremost here.
- **The school culture needs attention.** In the schools visited by the review team, the morale of teachers and administrators was low. We heard about and witnessed inappropriate behavior on the part of adults and bullying and physical fighting on the part of students.
- **Facilities.** In all but one of the schools, the buildings were in very poor – and in one, absolutely dire - condition. In some cases, the facilities clearly disrupted learning and possibly students' health.

### *Middle and High Schools*

- **There is an exceptionally low bar for instruction.** *Very little student learning was going on in the classrooms and schools we visited.* Instruction is what students experience every day, and its effectiveness matters for students' long-term success academically and beyond. Therefore, we focus first and foremost upon classroom-level instruction.
- **School culture is utterly broken.** *Teachers do not feel safe in school; students do not feel safe in school.* There is widespread agreement that bullying, demeaning, and even physical violence are occurring within the school walls at an unprecedented level. Unfortunately, many principals seemed to take a relatively mild view of the conditions in schools, but teachers and students did not.

## Classroom Observations

Classroom visits included an analysis using the Instructional Practice Guide, a college- and career-readiness, standards-aligned observational rubric created by Student Achievement Partners. The IPG defines a list of observable classroom practices, which are themselves comprised of key indicators that reflect instruction that aligns with standards and maximizes students' learning.

**Elementary ELA.** English Language Arts classrooms showed an overall lack of instructional rigor. While approximately two-thirds of observed texts were at an appropriate level, only about half of them met the quality standard for exhibiting craft, thought, or information to build knowledge. Most of the teachers' questions were impressionistic and general rather than specific. There were only two classrooms in which there appeared to be a clear focus upon students' drawing evidence from the text and upon language and other text elements. While most teachers attended to vocabulary, this was often in a simplistic or rote way. When the curricular materials (worksheets, texts) were of higher quality, we found a greater chance of teachers' asking students to use evidence and attend to the qualitative nature of the text. In one school, we saw virtually no authentic reading, but only worksheets.

Student engagement was wanting. In only two classrooms did instruction focus on students' doing the majority of the work, and in many cases, students appeared eager to participate but were not given meaningful chances to do so. We observed no classroom in which there was genuine "productive struggle," in which students are called upon to grapple with, and persist through, challenging skills or concepts. As indicated above, students were not pressed to look for evidence in the texts, and there were almost no opportunities observed for students to engage with one another in meaningful ways. Another important feature of a standards-aligned classroom is teachers' "checking for understanding," which in the classrooms we visited seemed largely rote and did not lead to any observed change in instruction or meaningful feedback. Finally, students were given infrequent opportunities to strengthen or develop foundational language skills.

**Elementary Math.** The math classrooms were generally higher-performing than the ELA, although they too showed varying degrees of effectiveness. In one school, for instance, two classrooms focused primarily on rote computational work and provided no opportunities for student input or meaningful engagement. The other two lessons were stronger overall, but did not provide opportunities for meaningful challenge and productive struggle. Thus, even where instruction is otherwise strong, students did not tend to engage with one another's ideas or mathematical reasoning.

For the classroom observation summaries below, the order of the schools has been randomized – thus it does not correspond to the order in which they were visited – to protect their identity. Observations about the physical conditions seen in the schools have been removed and collected elsewhere in the report, also to protect the schools' identities.

**Secondary ELA.** Secondary school ELA instruction is extremely weak. On the IPG, not a single category of instruction on a 1-4 scale attained an average score across classrooms of more than 1.75. The review team rated instruction in most classrooms at the lowest possible level.

For instance, while many classrooms included grade-appropriate texts (e.g., *The Poet X*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Antigone*), teachers did not generally capitalize upon the texts' literary qualities, nor induce students to engage with those texts in a meaningful and rigorous way. Tasks and questions were not well sequenced in order to build depth of knowledge, skills, or vocabulary. There was little to no "productive struggle."

Student engagement was minimal. Particularly in high school classrooms, it was not uncommon for only a small percentage of the students to be participating in the lesson. In such circumstances, teachers resorted to providing the best instruction they could to those students, and largely ignored the behavior or disengagement of others. Even where lessons were designed for students to undertake the majority of the work, few students engaged with the assigned tasks. Very few opportunities for productive struggle occurred, and when they did, students were not especially likely to persist at tasks.

In *only one observed classroom* did students have a real chance to engage in written work, and very few opportunities were observed for students to engage with one another and share ideas. While we clearly observed some teachers engaging with students one-on-one in meaningful instruction, it was often not possible for them to do so with all students, especially those who were already disengaged.

**Secondary Math, summarized by Dr. Heather Hill.** In Providence, middle and high school math consists largely of teacher-directed instruction about mathematical facts and procedures. Although some teachers involved students in Common Core-aligned activities (e.g., productive struggle, engagement with rich tasks, and mathematical reasoning), such activity was rare, limited to two or three mathematics classrooms of the 35 observed by the review team. Even in most upper-level mathematics classes, students experienced the material as teacher-led instruction, with the teacher providing guidance about how students could execute a set of procedures in order to complete their assignments.

In a large number of classrooms, teachers did not press students to become engaged with the mathematics instruction, resulting in a variety of student off-task behavior: chatting with peers, checking phones, staring into space, or, in some cases, taking phone calls and watching YouTube videos. In some classrooms, this activity was loud enough to disrupt the learning of other students and, in some cases, led to student arguments that left the team concerned for student safety. In many classrooms, this activity went on for the duration of the observation. This occurred without substantial teacher attempts to redirect students toward engaging with the mathematics. In one school, in fact, some teachers arranged their classrooms such that the non-engaged students were sitting around the periphery (often with desks turned so that they were staring at a wall), while a small number of desks in the middle allowed on-task students to be closer to the teacher. In other classrooms, disengaged students sat near the back of the room.

To be clear, not all students were off-task; in each of the classrooms described just above, a number of students were taking notes and working diligently on practice problems. In a small number of advanced math classes, students were engaged in projects involving complex mathematical modeling

and application. However, we estimate that among observed classrooms on average, about one-third to one-half of students were off-task, with no teacher attempt to reach out and re-engage.

When mathematics was delivered to students, it was nearly always free of major teacher mathematical errors, though sometimes lacked the clarity that would support student learning. An example of the latter occurred when one teacher lost his place in solving a problem involving interest paid on a vehicle, and thus provided an ultimately confusing sequence of calculations for solving the problem. In another case, a teacher discussed vertical angles, then started working on a coordinate plane, labeling the y axis  $y = -1/2x + 5$  and the x-axis  $y = 2x + 3$ , then telling students to find the point of intersection. This teacher also confused the terms “expression” and “equation.” On occasion, the rule-based nature of instruction seemed likely to confuse students in their future learning. For instance, during a lesson on expressions, a teacher instructed students “to simplify” if they saw expressions with the same variable ( $3n + 3n$ ) but to factor if they saw an expression with different variables (e.g.,  $21y + 15x$ ). Students presented with problems that challenge this rule ( $3n + 3n^2$ ;  $3y + 5x$ ) would likely be confused.

Most content taught in the middle schools met grade-level standards. However, in the high schools visited, some of the content was behind grade level – either for the time in the year (i.e., factoring in late May during an Algebra 1 class) or in topic (e.g., simple interest rates).

Many classes this team attempted to visit were staffed by subs, aides, other teachers in the department, or had been disbanded for the day, with students sent to other rooms to wait out the class period. In general, students did not work on mathematics in classrooms covered by subs, aides, or when sent to sit in other classrooms; when other members of the department covered the missing teacher’s classroom, some student work did take place.

Many classrooms had aides, either attached to a specific student or acting as a second pair of hands in the classroom. Use of aides was uneven. In two schools, we observed aides very actively engaged in delivering (or redelivering) instruction to students, or providing 1:1 assistance. In other schools, aides were engaged in what seemed like busywork – e.g., checking the completeness of a social studies assignment on their computer – or were otherwise unengaged with students.

Often, the faculty/classroom lists provided by the administration at the beginning of the day were inaccurate. In two cases, teachers listed on the schedule had actually left the school.

Finally, we witnessed significant problems in the use of the Summit Learning Platform. In one school, Summit was the major mode of mathematics instruction; in other classrooms, it seemed to be used for supplemental (e.g., remedial or practice) instruction.

When we observed students using Summit, they were not engaged with the software in optimal ways. Instead of watching videos or reading tutorial texts, students went straight to the exam and attempted to answer questions. When they answered incorrectly, corrective text popped up, which students did read; they then tried again with the next question. Even if students progressed according to plan, their learning would be limited to how to answer problems in the format presented by the Summit



exam. In one school, we did not observe a single Summit math teacher engage in whole-class or even small-group math instruction. Instead, teachers either completed work at their desks, and/or answered questions when students raised their hand. Finally, the lack of teacher surveillance of student progress in some Summit classrooms meant that students worked very slowly through the material.

Off-task student behavior was the same as, or worse than, in the more traditional classrooms, with some students observably working on assignments from other classes, viewing YouTube videos (or similar), queuing songs on playlists, toggling between Summit and entertainment websites, or pausing on work screens while chatting with neighbors.

To paint a picture of one Summit classroom at a given moment during our visit: Four students were working on history, one student stalled on an index screen, one stalled on a choice screen, one focused on a screen with other (non-math) content, two doing mathematics well below grade-level work, and two doing mathematics at, or close to, grade level. There was an aide in this room, but he did not interact with kids. One team member asked him what his role was, and he said, “Supporting students, I’m an ELL teacher.” He did not speak Spanish, however (which many kids were doing), and he did not have content expertise. He explained that his role is not to teach language, but only to offer support—he can “break down” problems well for students. When asked what he was doing in that moment, he said he was marking PPT projects (for another class) as “complete” or “incomplete.”

For the classroom observation summaries below, the order of the schools has been randomized – thus it does not correspond to the order in which they were visited - to protect their identity. Observations about the physical conditions seen in the schools have been removed and collected elsewhere in the report, also to protect the schools’ identities.

## School A

### *Positives*

- Teachers generally had good energy but a wide range of classroom management skills. The most effective classroom management strategy on offer seemed to be “educational” games on computers.
- Some Kindergarten classrooms included play-based learning. (Other Kindergartens were doing straight worksheets.)

### *Challenges*

- Curriculum and Instruction:
  - ELA classrooms displayed Reading Street, but this curriculum was in use in only one out of six observations.
  - There was almost no authentic reading in ELA: just isolated skill work (e.g., categorizing adjectives).



- Inadequate Student Support:
  - There was insufficient support for bilingual students and teachers. The English-speaking teacher's instructions were lost in translation in an ESL classroom.
- Heavy and unproductive use of technology. Teachers clearly need support in structuring students' independent work time.

## School B

### *Positives*

- Several teachers led whole-group instruction effectively.

### *Challenges*

- Generally low academic rigor.
- Very little authentic reading in ELA.
- The rigorous instruction we witnessed was done in small groups, while the rest of the class was on computers playing questionable games.
- Some teachers' tones were disrespectful of children.
- Inadequate substitute teachers meant that students were split up all over the school.
  - Example: Because a teacher was on jury duty, one 5<sup>th</sup>-grader came into a kindergarten classroom to work all day independently.

## School C

### *Positives*

- Some positive connections between teachers and students. Seems like a safe space for students
- Many caring adults in building but there didn't seem to be cohesive support.

### *Challenges*

- Very few opportunities for student ownership of work.
- No coherent ELA curriculum. There was a different textbook in every classroom, even within grades.
- Low academic rigor was ubiquitous. The math was all algorithmic with little attempt to support conceptual understanding.
- The attitude and demeanor of most teachers was fatigued and defeated.
- Students' depth of knowledge and engagement in academic work was on the lower end of the scale.
- There was heavy technology use in all grades (including K and 1), and it was largely unsupervised and with questionable educational content.
- Teachers' interaction with students seemed quite often to be *not culturally responsive*. We witnessed policing of bodies and a preoccupation with manners.
- The substitute teacher issue was serious in this school; the inclusion classrooms were over-ratio and sometimes only had one teacher.

## School D

### *Positives*

- Teachers were enthusiastic and willing to form relationships with students.
- The climate was positive, calm, and supportive.
- Every classroom seemed to have an essential question posted.

### *Challenges*

- The Summit platform (personalized learning) did not seem to be serving students' needs. The content was low-rigor (6th graders spent a lot of time defining the word community, for example). Students did not have time to interact with one another or with teachers. Teachers interacted with one student at a time, and students became off-task for long periods of time.
- The team witnessed new teachers who could benefit from coaching.
- While many teachers across the board seemed to respect students, their teaching often lacked instructional depth nor did they challenge students adequately.
- The number of students in classrooms varied widely (as low as 12, as many as 23).
- There were zero manipulatives used in math classes.
- The substitute teacher issue was obvious in this school, as well.

## School E

### *Positives - No Substantial Challenges*

- The building and classrooms were in top condition. The paint seemed recent, and we saw a maintenance person on duty.
- The classrooms were huge, which facilitated the success of small groups.
- Instruction and classroom management were of high quality across the board. Teachers were enthusiastic, caring, and used best practices.
- Some classrooms seemed to be using blended learning successfully with high student engagement and teacher monitoring.
- The culture supported students' talking to each other about their learning. They often referred to posted anchor charts about behavioral/learning norms.

## School F

### *Positives*

- Teachers had a pleasant and friendly tone towards students (only one notable exception).
- Many teachers introduced themselves to our team and expressed interest in conversing about the learning taking place in the room.
- The teachers seem to enjoy teaching at this school and working hard. There were many adults in the hallways for transitions.

### Challenges

- The level of rigor was low in most classes, with lots of worksheet and high technology use.
- The opportunities for students to collaborate were inconsistent from classroom to classroom.
- The class sizes were also inconsistent (example: one English classroom had 4 students, one EL classroom had 28 students). As a team, we were unsure of how enrollment in each class worked.
- The lack of substitutes was also an issue at this school, as it was throughout the district.
- There was little evidence of intentional and meaningful learning/connection to real world (procedural work vs. application).
- There did not seem to be consistent language or expectations surrounding behavior.

## School G

### Successes

- There were a few strong classrooms with good routines, engagement, integration across the subjects, and culturally responsive teaching - including a science and a French classroom.
- ELA instruction did in some cases ask students to think critically and develop skills such as persuasion. Some ELA classes were using online learning (StudySync), and the quality appeared to be relatively strong. Questions were open ended and students were actively writing.

### Challenges

- The review team found large inequities between academically advanced and general classrooms, especially integration classrooms.
- Across the board, students were compliant but unengaged. Most instruction was rote, and it was not standards-aligned.
- In inclusion classrooms, teachers used dismissive language and avoided engaging with the included students.
- Math instruction was organized but largely procedural in nature. Students were called upon to give answers or describe procedures, but were not given opportunities to discuss ideas or think about math in a complex way.
- Some portion of students in each classroom was disengaged or disruptive, and there were some students who openly defied teachers with no apparent consequences.
- Bullying seemed to be an issue for students, and sometimes fights, especially on Fridays.

## School H

### Successes

- The school environment was clean, bright, and orderly. Student artwork and cultural representations lined the hallways. Teachers reported feeling like the school is a family – the

staff care about, support, and enjoy camaraderie with one another. The school felt safe and everyone seems calm and relaxed, and speak with pride about the school.

- A few of the classes were engaging and interactive. These tended to be electives or courses in which teachers had developed new content.

### Challenges

- In the majority of classrooms, students were not focused. In many classrooms, students sat quietly with headphones in, stared at their phones, completely disconnected from the environment around them.
- In one classroom, students were copying and pasting segments of the text into answer boxes. For example, the title of the article was “Ninth Grade: The Most Important Year of High School.” When prompted to read the title and explain what they expected the piece to be about, students copied the words “the most important year of high school” as their answer. This continued throughout the reading comprehension exercise. In another class, students were taking a quiz on remedial-level math problems, and often just used a calculator to find the answer and then typing it into the online quiz.
- Looking at the online learning organizational platform dominated instructional time. Students often just clicked back and forth to act as if they were occupied.

### School I Challenges

- The vast majority of observations witnessed classrooms where no instruction at all was taking place. In several cases, teachers were missing with no clear reason, and we noted with surprise that it was not apparent that the principal had a clear picture of who was where, teaching what, and when.
- The instruction that did take place was largely procedural and unengaging. Mostly, teachers would undertake the work of the lesson, and students would volunteer to “fill in the blank,” but there were no opportunities for serious engagement with ideas or for students to explain their thinking.
- Teachers circulated and could persuade students to do a single problem or question with some prompting, but most students spent most of their time on their phones or socializing, yelling, or moving about the room.
- Teachers were heard yelling at students constantly throughout the building. Discipline appeared to be enacted with no clear pattern, and rules varied significantly from room to room.
- Bullying, both verbal and physical, was open and visible around the school. Some students visibly tried to hide or distance themselves from their peers to avoid conflict.
- Transitions were a major problem at the school and contribute to the lack of instruction taking place.

- There was no visible coherence from classroom to classroom. Although online remediation-type math programs were witnessed in many classrooms, every classroom seemed to be using something different.
- None of the principal's stated plans for school improvement related to classroom instruction.

## School J

### *Successes*

- The overall school climate was safe and respectful.
- Students seemed to engage purposefully with the content.
- The school used instructional aides well, which was unique among the middle and high schools we visited.
- CTE classes were strong.

### *Challenges*

- Instruction in most classrooms was below grade level.
- Students almost universally disliked the Summit program. They told the team that they were burned-out through the overuse of screen time, and bored. Some claimed that students actively left school as a result of the platform. There were classes we visited in which teachers appropriately integrated a blended learning model, but in most cases, students were just staring at the screens, totally disengaged.
- Large numbers of students seem to be chronically absent. Because of the way the Summit program is set up, one student missed about half of the school year and still earned a B.

## School K

### *Successes*

- Some classrooms provided positive learning environments. The arts and CTE programs had the materials they needed. Some teachers displayed evidence of good routines and competent planning, such as a lesson on *The Poet X* that was well organized and made good use of a second educator in the room, or a great standards-based geometry lesson. There was some evidence of strong student work product, especially in ELA. Students especially reported that they enjoyed the URI writing class.

### *Challenges*

- There was an overall sense from the team that they saw two different schools here: one for those who chose to engage and were getting a decent education; the other for those who did not show interest and were left to do whatever they liked. The seating arrangements often

actively facilitated this segregation, with engaged students sitting front and center in an inner ring, and disengaged students sitting against the walls, far from the teacher.

- There seemed to be no discipline policy when it came to cell phones.
- Some classes had no visible instruction occurring. In one room, the teacher seemed frightened of the students and was completely unable to manage the room. In one French lesson, no French was spoken by anyone in the room.
- Special populations seemed unsupported. In one self-contained classroom a teacher was by herself with two students in wheelchairs. S/he reported feeling terrified that if there were a fire drill, s/he would be unable to get them out of the building by herself. We were told that whether students get aides is determined at the district level, not as part of the IEP, which can lead to a mismatch between student needs and actual supports. Teachers said that students were often inappropriately placed in self-contained classrooms, and teachers really struggled to differentiate.
- In multiple classrooms, it was clear that most students were working well below grade levels.

## School L

### *Successes*

- There were a handful of teachers working incredibly hard to provide high-quality instruction for their students. These teachers were spread among subject areas and programs and are not isolated in advanced academic tracks.
- The special education team was currently fully compliant and provided quality education to the high-needs students in their care. In many electives, integration was effective and positive for all students, and many self-contained ELA and Math classes were providing high-quality instruction at grade level. This was unique among schools we visited.

### *Challenges*

- The team agreed that in this school, the majority of teachers and students appeared to have largely given up on an education.
- While most students were compliant, they were not engaged. We saw students sitting at their desks, sedate, with headphones in their ears scrolling through their phones. They did not respond to teachers, and teachers rarely attempted to engage them beyond yelling at them periodically. In one classroom, there was a Senior taking a final exam, scrolling through social media, leaving the blank test untouched. S/he was not using the phone to attempt to cheat. S/he simply was not taking the exam, and the teacher did not make any attempt to change the behavior.
- ELL classrooms were especially weak. Their class sizes were large, and teachers were working extremely hard, often alone, and unable to provide adequate support for the number of students present and the range of abilities in the room. As a result, most ELL students were barely able to communicate in English at all and appeared completely disengaged, both in self-contained and inclusion settings.

- Some rooms were utterly chaotic and unsafe. Students were laughing, screaming, moving around and physically harassing one another, climbing up bookshelves.
- In some classrooms, teachers focused on engaging with the handful of students who were attempting to do the work and showed no interest in engaging with the disruptive students.
- The discipline policies within the school were unclear and poorly-communicated.

## Interviews with Elementary (and some Middle) School Teachers, Principals, and Students

In each school, the review team conducted interviews and focus groups with administrators, principals, and students. As noted at the beginning of this section, in every school, students and teachers named specific individuals who cared about the wellbeing and academic progress of students. Many elementary schools have strong plans in place to support students' Social and Emotional Learning.

The review team found it striking that, despite the lack of rigorous instruction in classrooms, *few adults talked about the risks of under-challenging students*. Many did, however, cite the *lack of coherent curriculum*, and the *lack of professional development*, as deleterious to the learning environment. We address both below.

Other concerns that emerged across interviews and focus groups:

- **School culture.** In the schools visited by the review team, the morale of teachers and administrators was low. We heard about and witnessed inappropriate behavior on the part of adults and bullying and physical fighting on the part of students.
- **Facilities.** In all but one of the schools, the buildings were in very poor – and in one, absolutely dire – condition. In some cases, the facilities disrupted learning and possibly students' health.
- **Collective Bargaining Agreement.** Administrators and some teachers reported, in obvious and deep frustration, that it was next to impossible to remove bad teachers from schools or find funding for more than the one day of contractual professional development per year.
- **Human Capital.** There are chronic shortages of substitute teachers (needed in part because of high levels of absenteeism of regular teachers), social workers, counselors, support specialists in reading and math, and properly certified teachers and specialists for ELL and SPED students. Our teams found that “In some of the elementary schools, there was no bilingual staff member present in the main office.”

## Successes

### *Devotion of Some Principals, Teachers, and Supporting Staff*

Many interviewees commented upon the devotion of individual teachers and principals. So did students, many of whom complimented specific teachers. In one school, we heard almost universally positive comments about the principal. It became clear in focus groups and after-school conversations that teachers are committed to their students and deeply distressed when their students are short-changed. Teachers reported in several schools that the very hardships they faced in their teaching work had prompted them to work more intensely with their colleagues - including after hours - for the sake of children.

The team heard about good teaching from students in Kindergarten (specific examples of differentiation) and 3-5<sup>th</sup> Grades. We heard from ELL, Math and Reading coaches that they think very positively about their principal. We heard about strong efforts to get to know students' parents, including *via* multiple digital platforms (Kinvolved, Class Dojo, PTO Facebook, etc.).

### *Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)*

We heard from many teachers and principals about the district's efforts to support the emotional and social well-being of students, and to approach this inclusively across the whole school. Although teachers and principals constantly referenced the need for even more resources in this domain, almost all interviewees appeared convinced of the necessity and importance of this work and recognized that there has been a modest increase in resources. There is real pride in the fact that SEL is being implemented in some schools.

## Challenges

### *Facilities*

One elementary school stood out as having excellent building conditions: the furniture and paint appeared to be new, and the classrooms were well appointed and spacious. This proved to be an exception, as the schools varied considerably in their physical condition. The worst reduced seasoned members of the review team to tears.

For instance, in one school,

- “Students here wanted my [review team member’s] magic wand to fix the ‘crumbling floors;’ they wanted locks on the bathroom stalls; they said that ‘sometimes the water is brown.’”
- We interviewed teachers at the end of the day and many of them brought up similar concerns, including lead in the drinking water. Our team later took a picture of a letter from the EPA that was posted above the drinking fountain on the first floor confirming the lead story.



- Teachers told us that there was lead paint falling from the ceiling on the third floor, and that kindergarteners were not allowed up there but that the fourth grade was housed on that same contaminated floor. One team member witnessed brown water coming out of a tap. The teachers confirmed that the water was brown and had stained the sinks.
- Our team saw that “the paint on the ceilings on the third floor were peeling in sheets. We didn’t see any actually falling off while we were there, but teachers reported that it actually does come down in sheets from time to time.”
- The teachers said that there was also asbestos on the third floor. A staff member told us that the gym was on the bottom floor, and that there was a leaking raw sewer pipe in the ceiling for over a year. It dripped on the heads of the children as they passed through the threshold, and they had had to dodge the drips and the puddle. He had asked to have it fixed, had filed grievances, and finally posted the issue on social media. This seems to have produced results; although he got called into the office, the problem was fixed within a couple days after posting it publicly.
- Teachers also told us there were rodents in the school, and that students had sticky mouse traps stuck to their shoes.
- Also reports of constant leaks- one teacher said s/he had 8 buckets in her room all year. Students interviewed in this school told the team they didn’t feel safe – several said “we feel safer at home.” They reported 32 students in a room without enough chairs so they sat on the floor.

One team member from JHU, with deep experience of visiting the most physically run-down schools in Arkansas and Georgia, reported that “nothing s/he saw was like what I witnessed in Providence.” Such extreme problems were not ubiquitous, but facilities problems did seem to occur frequently.

- In one school, students and teachers spoke of floors and ceilings in need of repairs. Our team saw that “the walls were visibly crumbling, the lighting was too dark, the water fountains did not work, and many tables were badly chipped.”
- In another, our team member noted that “the smell of stale urine in the physical therapy room was so strong that I had to hold my breath.”

It was clear from interviews across the system that getting repairs done is a haphazard business. One principal reported that to get a broken window fixed took “from one day to a month.”

Transportation is also problematic; in one school, children who want to attend after school clubs cannot participate, because there is no bus available.

### *Collective Bargaining Agreement*

#### *Hiring and dismissal policies*

Of all the issues raised across all interviews, the CBA hiring policies came in for the greatest critique.

One principal wanted the ability to re-hire the right staff but could not get rid of the weakest teachers. The team was told *by teachers* in another school that the inability of a school to fire the weakest teachers was a real problem, because there were teachers who “just weren’t doing what they were

supposed to be doing.” One principal reported still going to hearings about a teacher who had finally been put on administrative leave for repeated, inappropriate physical contact with children. The teacher is still on the roster and is still paid.

We heard frequently from principals that the district’s “criterion-based hiring” is far from being so. Principals report that they are not able to determine why a teacher has been labeled as “displaced.” It might be for academic incompetence or due to consolidation, and knowing *which* is critical for intelligent hiring choices.

More importantly, the multiple rounds that make up the hiring system undermine strong faculty placements. The team was told that principals usually cannot hire from outside the district until all inside-the-district candidates have been placed, which means that principals may be forced to hire an underperforming, but senior, teacher. Every time a job is filled, the teacher holds the post for a year before the process starts again- producing what one principal called “a limbo of churn every year.”

Principals described the process in detail as follows:

- **First Round.** First, principals post new jobs in their schools to teachers who already work there, in process known as *within-school teacher preferences*.
  - Several principals reported that they felt pressured by the union to give these teachers their preferred jobs, even if the principal did not believe it was in students’ best interests. Principals reported that they had “no say” in determining the grade level in which teachers work.
  - If no teacher within the school wants the job, it opens up for the second round.
- **Second Round.** At this stage, the job opening is posted to all currently-placed teachers in the district.
  - Principals must interview a minimum of three applicants for the job. Several principals indicated that they were required to interview the most senior applicant and, although they do not have to appoint that individual, many principals suggested there was pressure to do so.
  - At this stage, the principal can choose the candidate. However, the candidate has 48 hours to respond, in which interim the principal cannot offer the job to anyone else while the applicant can see what other job offers are available – and select the best one.
  - Simultaneously, “this same dance is going on across the district.” Principals indicated that there was a strategy involved with when jobs are announced and when offers are made, in order to try to attain the best candidates before they land at other schools.
  - If the job is not filled at this stage, it moves on to *open forced placement*.
- **Third Round.** At this stage, the district holds a hiring fair, otherwise known as the “displaced teacher fair.”
  - All open jobs within the district are posted, and displaced teachers are lined up by seniority. They enter a room one at a time where the open positions are posted, choose the one they would like, and it becomes theirs for one year, after which time they must go through the process again.

- If the job is still not filled at this stage, principals are allowed to interview applicants from outside the district.
- **Fourth Round.** Principals may interview teachers who are new to the district.

Teachers pointed out that the issue of effectiveness also applies to school principals, and that it is extremely rare to remove very poorly performing principals from the PPSD schools.

### *Professional Development (PD)*

The CBA allows only one paid day of professional development (PD) a year; everything else must be paid as overtime. The team heard repeatedly that even on that one day, much of the time is used up on how to use “data planning,” often “in the form of outdated checklists,” rather than on teaching and learning.

The lack of PD was a constant refrain across the schools. One school principal, facing the constraints of such limited funded PD in her school, reported that s/he “tried to job-embed PD but had to cancel because s/he couldn’t find the subs” to make it possible.

Professional development is not only an issue for teachers; principals reported that there were no funds for principal conferences or training. One of them relies upon webinars to expand professional knowledge.

There are other consequences: the lack of professional development impairs teachers’ ability to help special education students and to support students’ social and emotional learning.

- Teachers reported that, as a result of no support or preparation, “they are not meeting IEPs.” This is clearly a larger problem (at one elementary school, SPED leads told team members that “SPED services are not being met by the school and have not been met for many years at [their school] and across the district”), but teachers in the elementary schools spoke extensively about training.
  - PPSD “suggests PD but then offers none.”
  - Teachers at one school reported that “it is simply impossible to do our jobs” when it comes to meeting IEPs.
  - SPED Resource teachers in one school reported that they are not provided with any multi-sensory program to teach special needs children. They were told “make up your own – we don’t have the money.”
  - In another school, the review team was told that “half of the IEP students are inappropriately placed and the terms of their IEPs aren’t being met.” The team was also told that PPSD “has 10 mild to moderate seats in the district.”
  - The school psychologist was “not seeing the number of students they are required to see,” and “parents were only sometimes being told about their children’s IEPs and then not fully.” When informed repeatedly of these issues, PPSD central office “did nothing.” Only after staff went to RIDE was there very limited responsive action. The review team was told several times that school-level administrators told teachers not to communicate with PPSD about the lack of student support services.

- In another domain – Social and Emotional learning and support – teachers reported the same pattern, i.e., no support and no training. One group of teachers agreed that “75% of the children were in some kind of trauma” in their school, but that they had had no preparation on how to help effectively. The same teachers were told to write SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) goals, with no training to enable them do so.

### *Human Capital Issues*

The human capital issues go beyond the CBA, however. The review team saw shortages in important positions in most schools. The level of staffing is clearly inconsistent from school to school in ways not related to actual student numbers.

- One elementary school had neither a social worker nor an assistant administrator for a school of more than 400 students, 50% of whom are classified as Special Needs. All the teachers in this school strongly agreed that the principal needs an assistant. They explained that there was no second administrator, because PPSD doesn’t count Pre-K towards the quota.
- A second school of similar size did have a full-time social worker, but there had been no full-time counselor for the last three years. There had also been no Pre-K director for the last six months, and no SPED director - ever. One speech therapist had to manage 70 students, and one part-time psychologist conducts evaluations for the IEPs “and deal[s] with crises.” An art class had been cancelled, because the regular teacher was absent and there were no suitable substitute teachers. Students recalled that they had received “science teaching once in all of second grade,” and third graders reported they had had zero field trips this year. Students in one class reported that they had had a sub for “five weeks,” and a student in this group reported that he knew that they were behind the other kids as a result. The principal at this school confirmed the human capital challenge; there was the need to look for more substitutes constantly. In terms of pre-K, teachers reported to us that there was often only one adult in the room, which they said is a violation of the law.
- Across the board, and in every school, the team was told of a chronic shortage of vitally needed ELL coordinators, and a lack of bilingual support generally. One principal expressed concern that there were no bilingual clerical staff in the building.
- In one school, the key problems included no resident reading specialist with 80 ELL students in the building, and the visiting reading coach trying to serve more than 30 of them each day.

### *School Culture*

Teacher morale is clearly low. In one interview with 15 teachers, some were openly crying about what their students and they had to deal with: no discipline expectations or support to maintain behavioral norms; “total disconnect between 797 [shorthand for district offices] and the school;” “no bilingual support.” The team heard numerous variations on the same theme. Frequent changes in principal, in curriculum, in testing and standards; having little time for collaboration; and huge challenges with SPED, ELL and SEL have worn them down. There was testimony that the “negative

perception of PPSD” was a constant backdrop and sap on morale. Teachers told us that the lack of supports was hurting children in their school. In one school, teachers remarked that “they have third graders who have already given up and checked out.”

Principals’ morale is also low. We heard, for instance:

- “Firing is nonexistent.”
- “No subs to be found, no money for PD, and we’re not a community school anymore.”<sup>6</sup>
- Principals spend time on lunch duties but have little time left for the classroom.

The review team also witnessed several troubling examples of teacher behavior.

In one elementary school, a teacher berated students while trying to get them to the bathroom.

- The teacher asked the students (who were likely in third or fourth grade) to line up by gender and allowed them to go into the bathrooms one at a time.
- The teacher yelled at the students the entire time, taking away minutes of their recess on a clip board as punishment for misbehaving.
- The observer noted that the children were standing peacefully in line and chatting with their neighbors, but the teacher wanted silence. Finally, the teacher told them to put their hands in the air, stating, “I should see the backs of your heads and the backs of your hands.”

In the same school, another member of our team witnessed other teachers who were disrespectful and very loud towards younger students. We overheard scornful yelling in the hallways as teachers and aides placed students into lines for extracurriculars or the bathroom.

The issue of teachers’ view of their environment also came up. In one school, teachers told the team that none of them lived in the district or sent their children to PPSD schools. This pattern was repeated in all the schools we visited; almost unanimously, teachers told us that they would send their children to a PPSD school “only if they could pick the teachers.”<sup>7</sup>

Team members at this school observed, and principals confirmed, high rates of teacher absenteeism. One example: in one elementary school, the office board listed fifteen absent teachers.

Student absenteeism came up frequently but appears to vary considerably school to school.

- In one school, our team was told that “10% of the classes are missing every day, with two to three tardies on top of that.”
- In another school, we were told that “half the kids on our roster are missing every day.”
- In a third school, we were told that one cause of absences is that students are afraid of being deported by ICE.
- Teams were told that PPSD appeared to exercise “no accountability” towards schools on this issue.

Student bullying is clearly another issue; in one elementary school, students told us that bullying occurred “every day at lunch,” and that stealing from backpacks happened frequently. One school

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<sup>6</sup> Many teachers noted the lack of community schools as “ruining the culture.”

<sup>7</sup> The president of the PTU said that 80% of PPSD teachers lived outside the district.

had “quiet rooms,” described by both a classroom observer and a parent as “solitary confinement rooms.” Several rooms used for behavioral interventions didn’t show up on our school map.

In three schools, our team was told by multiple students about “arranged fights” “often involving girls” that took place “especially on Fridays” and that were “actively promoted on social media.”

One elementary school principal told the team that her most important contribution to her school was “ensuring that the students feel safe.”

### *Curriculum*

Teachers, principals, and even students noted the lack of an established curricula as problematic. Representative anecdotes include:

- Teachers said it was hard on students to experience inconsistent curricula from class to class and grade to grade. When asked about the fact that there were supposed to be just four curricula vetted by the district, we were told about multiple impediments: in one school, the new curriculum materials did not arrive until November and included no appropriate materials for IEP students.
- In other cases, it was clear that ambivalence about using a particular curriculum started at the top. In one school, the principal told us that the school had purchased Eureka [a math curriculum] but that s/he was “not a fan of programs” and so “considers Eureka more of a resource than a curriculum.” Nevertheless, this principal intended to purchase three new ELA curricula next year.
- Without PD, teachers often use older curricula, and mixtures from all over including the internet (as confirmed by our team in the classroom visits). In one school, the principal listed almost 20 different curricula, between math and ELA, that are in use.
- SPED teachers reported that they “are constantly needing to find and/or create our own curriculum, and the resources to use it.” In one school, SPED teachers were “asked to put in for a donor” who would support the purchase of curriculum materials.
- In our conversations with students across schools, many reported curriculum gaps – no science in a grade level in one school, no social studies in a grade level in another.

Representative quotes include:

- “We use what we can find,” said an elementary school teacher in a group interview.
- Teachers in several schools told the team that they would “trade autonomy for a curriculum.”

## *Interviews with High School (and some Middle) Teachers, Principals, and Students*

The review team also meet with administrators, teachers, and students in every school. We heard about several some positive initiatives in schools, such as the increased enrollment in Advanced Placement courses, better communication with parents via Kinvolved, and a new data system in place to monitor students’ social and emotional behavior.

However, the teachers and students with whom we spoke focused almost exclusively upon the negatives, as did most administrators. As indicated above, the most frequently cited challenges *were low academic expectations, dysfunctional and/or dangerous school culture, and student needs that are not adequately supported*. These issues came up repeatedly and across multiple constituencies.

Within the school culture conversations, there was general agreement amongst teachers, but not amongst principals, that the pressure to reduce suspensions has resulted in *a lack of safety in schools*. There was also widespread agreement that students' social and emotional needs are not being met – to the detriment of both learning and environment. Administrators and many teachers repeated the claim that the district *includes teachers who should not be in front of children*. In one middle school, we were told in several groups about one particular teacher who was known for making profane and racist slurs against students, but could not be removed because “s/he lawyers up and cannot be fired.”

Because of the ubiquity of these sentiments, we provide findings that cut across all constituencies except where noted.

### *Low Academic Expectations*

Interviewees spoke consistently and frequently about a *lack of rigor and also the generally low expectations*. They cited the following as contributing factors:

- Great variability in the quality of instruction, and very little accountability for teacher performance.
- Limited support for instruction.
- Lack of a common curriculum and the absence of curriculum consistency exacerbated by student mobility, emphasis on procedural math and poor-quality reading material.
- Teacher absenteeism.
- Deficiency in content expertise among secondary teachers.
- Multiple instances of very poor implementation of the Summit learning platform, which is part of a general perception that a lot of money spent on technology but with very inadequate professional support.

Unfortunately, the statements by some principals about their schools did not match academic results. For instance, one principal reported that “85-90% of the teachers are effective,” and that s/he would “feel great about sending [their] own kids attending this school.” Yet the most recent proficiency results in math for that school are below 5%.

When asked whether their students were getting a rigorous education, the first two teacher responses at one school were, “Hmmmm” and “No.” A third said, “Pressure to graduate students can make things really difficult.” In another school, a teacher said “Students know they don’t have to do anything to pass,” and a colleague added, “There’s pressure to pass kids even when they clearly don’t deserve it.”



A number of students told the team that they knew they were being under-challenged.

- One said, “I came here from the Dominican Republic, and I’ve been here for three years. In the D.R., school was more serious, and I got more homework.”
- Another said, “They shouldn’t let us pass if we don’t deserve it.”
- A third said, “Teachers don’t have high expectations for you.”

One issue related to academics is the [lack of a consistent curriculum](#), which some teachers cited as the “top issue.” Exemplary comments include:

- “Just today I was told there is no money for new materials to be put in place around an ‘ESL curriculum.’”
- “Not much direction with curriculum...We are given resources and told to figure it out.”
- “Teachers have too much autonomy over curriculum, especially in English....”
- “Teachers don’t know state standards well. They need clear curriculum-aligned standards.”
- “As a district we need a guaranteed viable curriculum, which we don’t have. There is no curriculum coordination across high school and it’s a problem because of high student mobility.”
- “The former Commissioner and Superintendent felt that schools should have autonomy. The Commissioner was very vocal about this, and the Superintendent followed suit. But while the intention was to create healthy competition among schools, what it has created is inequity across schools. With the very high mobility rate, they [students] enter each different school with a completely different program and different curriculum. I use that term loosely. We don’t have a curriculum. No two teachers on the same page in this district at the middle level.”

The team saw and heard evidence of lots of curriculum switching. In one school, in ELA, the school was switching out their current ELA curriculum for Springboard, which is in fact what many teachers had used before their current curriculum was put in.

Related to this, many teachers and principals noted the [lack of professional development](#) as a causal factor.

It must be said that there is significant skepticism about [Summit Learning Platform](#).

- Only two principals were positive about Summit technology. One said: “There was successful implementation and good buy-in following initial success.” A few teachers were also positive: “Summit makes students work harder. It brings themes to instruction.”
- Other principals, and teachers, said mixed to negative things. The most common reaction was a variation on what one principal said: “In a way it has helped but there has been no training for it.” From another principal: “Summit is used for grades 9 and 10 because of high teacher and student absenteeism.”
- Many students had a negative view: in one school, all students reported disliking Summit. “I don’t like the projects because it takes away from teachers teaching.” Another said: “With Summit you can basically finish in one week and then coast.”



## Student Supports

The lack of support for students, and the disconnect between students and teachers, came up frequently. Interviewees noted the following, specific challenges:

- The demographic mis-match between students and teachers is on many people's minds. One teacher said: "The students feel the teachers live in a different world, and they are right."
- Language barriers.
  - Teachers and administrators often referenced the large influx of immigrant students. In one school, 72 of 240 members of the graduating cohort were newcomers. "They spoke multiple languages without sufficient support for learning English."
  - "I have a student in my intervention class who doesn't speak English, and I have no idea if he can even read in Spanish."
  - Another teacher said: "There is no information from the registration center about the educational background of new [ELL] students. There has been no improvement for ELL since the DOJ report. The report mandated that every teacher in Providence needed 10 hours of PD for teaching ELL. The PD was delivered poorly, there were no administrators attending, and it only lasted three hours total."
- Social Emotional Support. Although they acknowledged increased attention to the issue, teachers believe that much more support is needed for socio-emotional learning. Specifically, they need translators or counselors who speak languages other than English or Spanish. They also express a desire for more counselors and social workers in general.
- Outside-the-school challenges. Many Providence students we spoke to referenced this issue. For example, one high school student said to the team: "They [teachers] say to me, 'I don't know why you're so tired at 7 am, we all woke up early.' I work from 5 or 7 pm until 4 am. I got points off my final presentation because I woke up late. I'm not sure if I can graduate."
- Teachers reported, in all the schools we visited, that SPED, ELL and other students often end up in the same classroom. We found repeated references to the lack of support for SPED children – and to passing them along unprepared: "Social promotion is a huge issue. Half of SPED students enter middle school with failing grades."
- One school informed us of 70 cases of suicidal ideation among students this year. The school has had several suicide attempts, though none successful. Students on suicide watch are not permitted to leave the classroom.

## School Culture

Teachers were generally negative about their own schools. We asked teachers to rate their willingness to allow their own children to attend the school where they were teaching (1 representing "least willing" and 5 "most willing"). In one school, several teachers responded, but none answered greater than a "1." A counselor inquired "whether zero is an option." One teacher said they would be willing to allow their children to attend the school, "If they could select the teachers and students in their classroom." When asked why they provided such low answers, *all teachers cited school climate or safety concerns*. In another school, the teachers offered grade scores of 0, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 2.5, 3.5.

- A group of teachers in one school listened without push back when a colleague said: “There’s no student accountability...They’re using filthy language, cutting class, smoking weed in the bathrooms and there are no repercussions because the admins have been told they can’t suspend kids. There are no consequences for not showing up to detention.”
- Another said, “A student can skip class 15 times with no consequences other than detention.”

Cell phone usage is likewise problematic.

- Cell phone use was a very common complaint of teachers across the schools we visited.
- In one school, we were told the following: “There’s no penalty for being on a phone. At least 10 phones out are in my class every day. They are Facetiming and watching Netflix in the classroom with no headphones.”
- In another, “Students are on their phones constantly. They don’t even talk to each other.”
- Students’ remarks supported these reports. A representative comment from one of them: “There is constant phone usage among students. There’s no consistent policy for phones, every teacher is different. Some you have to put it away but others it’s a struggle. Some teachers don’t care.”

Violent fighting and bullying are present often enough that *students and teachers do not feel safe*.

- In one school, we were told that it is “very common for fights to erupt in cafeteria.”
- Another school is “famous for fights. There are fights every week. At least one big fight per month.”
- Assaults have gotten “very violent,” with girls throwing other girls on the floor, and then surrounded by other people kicking them. There are violent attacks on buses. “I had a new-arrival student go into the bathroom and another student pummeled his head into the wall and there were no consequences for it. Teachers have almost given up entering infractions because they know there is no follow-through.”
- We heard often about bullying. One principal remarked that, “There needs to be more focus on bullying, which has become a bigger problem due to social media. It is now ‘too easy’ to be a bully. A detective assists with bullying issues and has met with families at the police station to mediate.”
- There are gang problems. According to one teacher, “I had 12 gang members in my classroom who ended up being arrested. Nobody had warned me...”

One teacher put it this way: “Students emulate others exhibiting poor behavior because there is no discipline. One student not doing work became two and then three. They see that they can just sit on their phone and watch videos and not work.”

There is an important and concerning divergence between teachers’ and principals’ views about suspensions and student behavior.

Teachers told reviewers that that it is now too difficult to suspend kids. They report that the directive to maintain low suspension rates comes from RIDE. The implementation of restorative justice is widely regarded as poor or worse, resulting in no consistent discipline policy within schools and disruptive and sometimes violent student behavior and student and teacher concerns about safety. We heard several references to the fact that there was no preparation for teachers to manage the new

system: “Teachers have received zero training in restorative justice. It’s not working here.” This concern was pervasive across the schools. It was clear from other interviews that many teachers believed that decreased suspension rates had a lot to do with a failure to enforce disciplinary measures for serious offences.

Teachers feel unsafe. In one school, a math teacher was out for two weeks because s/he had been pushed down in the hall by a student.

*Principals* seem to see the issue differently.

- One said to us: “There were 2,000 suspensions when he started his job compared to 40 in the most recent year. Now, students are not referred to student affairs “unless they have a gun or assault a teacher.” They now boast “the lowest suspension rate in the city.”
- The review team was told in one school that the administration deliberately manipulates suspension data. In the words of one interviewee, “Several students were out after they deliberately planned for, and then took part in, a video-recorded fight. They were out for one week but were labeled as “suspended for one day,” for admin purposes. If someone looks at attendance records for the last week, there were multiple students who didn’t take a test. Students were out suspended but marked as absent to keep suspension rates artificially low. Pressure comes from the state. This has been happening for at least 2 or 3 years now.”

*Low academic expectations, troubled school cultures, and a lack of student supports were by far the most frequent remarks we heard, and they were validated by our classroom and school observations.*

We include several other issues that arose frequently, below.

### *Staffing and Collective Bargaining Agreement*

Many interviewees noted the following concerns:

- The Collective Bargaining Agreement.
  - One of the principals told us that he “feels powerless to intervene if a teacher is performing poorly.”
  - Another principal stated, “In the case of an abusive teacher, s/he is placed on unpaid administrative leave but then ‘lawyers up’ through the union and ultimately returns to the classroom.”
  - A third principal said “Bad teachers in the district are “reshuffled...They just make the rounds every year. It’s a toxic dynamic.”
  - We heard several stories from principals such as the following (specifics omitted to protect identity): “You try to get the good ones but otherwise it’s a forced placement. I had one teacher who interviewed for [subject x] that we didn’t select. In the end s/he was force-placed here anyway...There was another teacher at [school Y] falling asleep in front of children....S/he would make up grades for students because s/he didn’t even know them. We fought her placement but the union prevailed. S/he

ended up here and... made false claims about [Z]. S/he has been on leave since then..... [Another] teacher missed [more than 70] days last year and was asleep when we got to the HR meeting. The union negotiated his/her punishment down to a [few days] suspension.”

- Staffing shortages. A lack of substitute teachers often results in “teachers’ teaching where they are unassigned.” We were told several times about long-term teacher vacancies and heard multiple reports of high levels of teacher absenteeism.
- There were widespread accounts of low teacher morale (with exceptions), with multiple expressions of teachers feeling underappreciated, stressed, and anxious. Coupled with this, we heard about administrative reliance on “imperfect, gameable metrics” as measures of success (e.g. suspension rates).
- Almost all principals wanted more authority to hire and remove teachers – one said “If I can’t reach expectation then fire me, but I need more control over who works here. I want more control and more responsibility.”

### *PPSD Central Office*

Most of the comments made by those we interviewed were not positive. There was the frequent expression of a [disconnect](#) between central office and the conditions on the ground in the schools.

- One school counselor told the team that s/he is “beyond frustrated” about the relationship with central office, noting that “they never visit the school but are critical anyway.”
- One teacher said, “Here in Providence, the central office functions as an ivory tower. Many decisions are made there with no insight into how things will be implemented. They could put the Nike symbol on the building because everything is just ‘do it.’”
- Another said: “Different initiatives are adopted from behavioral to academic to lunch programs. There is no insight into how such programs are implemented. Some employees are out of touch with practice.”
- We were told that, in certain cases, directors in charge of principals have never been principals. Of one such case, a teacher asked why the director would be leading middle schools, “all of which are failing,” and finding the principals to be “highly effective?”
- One administrator said, “The central office is constantly adding staff they don’t need. All kinds of people with different titles. The director of partnerships has 2 people under them. It’s unclear what they do. Human Resources is larger than ever, but nothing has actually changed for schools.”
- We heard several references to the sense that the office doesn’t recognize real achievement. A principal reported that “lack of respect for work from central office” was one of the ongoing challenges.



## Community and Parental Voices

The review team conducted community focus groups, and RIDE circulated surveys to which parents and teachers, as well as some students, responded via Web Link.<sup>8</sup> Others sent letters. *We focus in this report upon key themes that were repeated again and again.*

When asked about the **strengths** of the district, parents and community members responded most frequently with the diversity of the student body and the devotion of specific teachers (note, however, that many also listed teachers as a “challenge”).

The top two **challenges** that parents and community members articulated again and again:

- **Academic Quality.** Parents are concerned with lack of rigor, changing and misaligned curriculum, low expectations, and inequitable access within district. Latino parents are particularly articulate about the lack of expectations and even lack of homework assignments.
- **School Culture and Student Supports.** We heard reports of significant chaos and bullying in the schools, and of children who do not feel safe going to school.

Parents and community members also commented negatively on unsafe facilities, lack of communication with schools, low parental engagement, chronic absenteeism (amongst students and teachers), and a significant lack of teacher diversity.

### Academic Quality

Overwhelmingly, the vast majority of respondents stated that they either would not send their child to Providence schools if they had a choice, or that they would recommend or consider “certain schools” only. There was considerable distress about the lack of academic rigor, and reports of chronic low expectations for students. Latino parents frequently and vehemently expressed frustration at the absence of homework.

Representative responses:

There are low expectations for academics, and a misalignment between the work assigned and the way it is graded and what truly grade level work should look like. I

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<sup>8</sup> Beginning on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 182 survey responses were collected. Of those, 28 were in Spanish; we translated and included selections here. These responses in Spanish were grouped together by date indicating some mobilization effort in that school or community. Another 22 responses used all or part of a form letter for responses and were again largely grouped together by date, also indicating an organized effort.

have a fantasy of staring one of those humorous Instagram sites like "shit my kids have broken" that is instead called "shit my kids got an A on." As a seventh grader, my daughter has not yet been asked to write a single essay (unless you call the SINGLE PARAGRAPH she handed in once this year an "essay" like her teacher did). She slaps together her assignments at the last minute and gets an A every time. When I showed her what the Common Core says 7th grade writing should look like, she was shocked - "We haven't done anything like that." The last time she had to revise a paper was in 4th grade. I don't say this to claim my child is brilliant or that "she needs to be challenged." I say it because I believe all children need to be challenged and that they can rise to the occasion, but that the curriculum in PPSD and the way teachers are trained (or don't get trained) to implement it results in an ever-lower bar for what children can do." -PPSD Parent

Me gustaria que los ninos TENGAN DEPORTES Y MAS TAREAS PARA EL HOGAR. (*"I wish the students could take sports and had more homework!"*) - PPSD Parent

Para mi el mayor problema es que no le dejan tarea al nino en la semana y los fines de semana tampoco les dejan nada en VACACIONES deberian de darle un folleto para que lo entregue lleno para el siguiente ano eso seria bien beneficioso para los ninos. (*"For me, the biggest problem is that they don't assign homework during the week or on weekends; over holidays they should provide more information about the upcoming year."*) - PPSD Parent

"I am a third-generation public school teacher. I have spent my life dedicated to improving public schools across the country. When I started a family, I was excited and proud of the idea of sending my children to Providence public schools. I am increasingly convinced however that the school my eldest attends is not committed to serving its students ~ any of its students. The children are not challenged to achieve their full potential, and the teachers seem to be beaten down and exhausted by their work. There is no joy of learning. My child only knows instruction through worksheets. -PPSD Parent

I would absolutely, if at all possible, through every effort in your armor, send them to either a private school or a school that has a very low students to teacher ratio. I love Providence, I grew up here, I went to Hope, but it was at a time when you could actually learn something. -PPSD Substitute Teacher

Additionally, there were reports from both parents and teachers that there is inequitable access to resources and subject offerings between schools within the district, with students at some schools receiving recess, art, and music while others do not.

The only reason Classical has a band is because of the luxury of the East Side parents whose kids get to take lessons. -PPSD Teacher

We had gym, we had tennis, we had track and field.....Now they're only allowed to walk. -PPSD Substitute Teacher

### *School Culture and Needed Support Services*

Respondents almost uniformly agreed that there was inconsistent discipline and chaotic student behavior, and that many children feel unsafe. There were accounts by parents and students of bullying by both students and teachers, and recommendations for more support services, trauma training, and cultural-responsiveness training.

Teachers' contract allows them to be out too often, substitutes are ineffective and kids are losing out! I have a child - middle school- in "advanced academics" and she sits in the hallway so she can get work done. -PPSD Parent

All I want is for my children to feel safe at school. -PPSD Parent

Teachers are fed up and burnt out. Since the school year began, 3 of our child's 7th grade teachers have left with subs filling in. If teachers are not there to teach, children don't learn. Behavioral issues from half of the student population nearly halt the learning process on a daily basis. Our children are stressed by this behavior and do not always feel safe. -PPSD Parent

We had a couple cut ups in the class... There were students who would get up and they'd start shooting paper at the door like they were playing basketball. This kid once said to these kids "Shut the [explicative] up - I'm trying to get an education." -PPSD Teacher

Every school needs a full-time social worker. Cause those kids need someone to talk to - maybe they don't have gym but they have an hour to talk to someone. Your child might have a bigger issue. I can't teach if the behavior doesn't warrant it. There are a lot of people who want to teach but people are running from PPSD because of the behavior. That's Providence's biggest problem. -PPSD Teacher

### *Facilities*

Respondents agreed that school facilities were in "deplorable" condition and cited examples of lead drinking water, lead paint, mold, "broken asbestos tiles," rodents, and no heat or air conditioning.

Students know which schools are being invested in. They say, "That school has air conditioning, and computers, and books." Are we really investing in all students? -Community Member



### *Communication and Parent Engagement*

Respondents agreed that communication at the school and district level was wanting. Parents cited this as a reason for their perceived lack of engagement, feeling that it was difficult to advocate for their students. Many mentioned the absence of parent-teacher conferences at the school level<sup>9</sup> and their difficulties to obtain even an annual meeting with a classroom teacher.

RIDE needs to go to parents instead of expecting parents to come out to them. - PPSD Parent

Communication is haphazard at all levels in the schools. School to school it is different. It is not happening consistently. -PPSD Parent

It is kind of a part-time job advocating for your kid. - PPSD Parent

Because of language barriers and work schedules, if you are not linked up with outside supports or advocacy groups, there is no one standing up for you. - PPSD Parent

### *Chronic Absenteeism and Teacher Diversity*

Respondents agreed that chronic absenteeism, both of students and teachers, was a challenge in the district. A form letter used by many respondents called for stopping teachers who abused the system. Relatedly, there were many complaints about the lack of substitute teachers and the resulting problems of overcrowding in classrooms - and the impact on learning.

Respondents also agreed about the need for a teacher corps that more closely reflected the demographic makeup of the student body, calling for the hiring of more racially diverse teachers and citing the importance of students' seeing themselves reflected in the leadership of the school.

There is minimal teacher diversity. -PPSD Parent

There is a fair bit of name-calling [among students], including homophobic and racist slurs. I am also very disappointed that the teaching corps does not reflect the student body's diversity; students need to see themselves reflected in school leaders. -PPSD Parent

I visited [School A] for a tour because that is our neighborhood school. I was shocked to see the number of teachers absent and a shortage of substitute teachers to cover the classes. -PPSD Parent

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<sup>9</sup>The decision to hold parent/teacher conferences was reportedly left up to the schools. Some chose not to have conferences. Others held parent nights to which at least one parent reported the classroom teachers failed to attend.



At both [School B and School C], we have had issues with teachers being chronically absent....There are a number of things I would like to see improved, however the main things are having good leadership who show an interest in the children and their learning and then having less teachers absences. -PPSD Parent



## PPSD District Site Visit Operations and Community Partnerships May 20 – May 24, 2019

### Summary

The Operations and Partnerships review team was comprised of five members:

- Dr. Frank Sanchez, President, Rhode Island College
- Dr. Anthony Rolle, Dean, Alan Shawn Feinstein College of Education, URI
- Karen Taresevich, Superintendent, West Warwick Public Schools
- Carolyn Dias, former Assistant Dean of Operations and Special Projects, Roger Williams University
- Michelle Davidson, Parent Advocate
- Dr. Ashley Berner, Deputy Director, Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy (Team Lead)

Our interviews took place at the district offices between May 20 – May 24 and via Zoom or phone subsequently. All told, the review team conducted eight meetings with staff from fourteen different offices at Providence Public School District (PPSD); five meetings of support partners (from professional development providers and youth organizations to teacher preparation programs) representing twenty-one different organizations; one meeting with PPCSD vendors; and one meeting with teachers numbering more than 25. We also conducted individual interviews and focus groups with business leaders, the Mayor's staff, and staff from RIDE; these are placed at the end of this section. The groups raised numerous concerns, some of which received only scant attention.<sup>10</sup> *We focus upon key themes that were repeated again and again and that cut across multiple constituencies.*

Two successes consistently emerged from these conversations:

- **Some district offices.** Many partners complimented the teams at several district offices, as having streamlined processes and created an inclusive and strong vision for success.
- **Some principals and teachers.** Every group noted the presence of devoted teachers and principals who go above and beyond to support student success.

Five challenges were articulated again and again:

- **Governance and Vision.** No one we interviewed thought the system worked well or posed a coherent vision.
- **Union Contract.** All but one group (a district office) emphasized the negative effects of two components of the Collective Bargaining Agreement: the hiring/firing process and the paucity of professional development days.

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<sup>10</sup> We note, for instance, that several groups feel the district is unprepared for the growing number of ELL students; others noted difficulties with the enrollment systems.

- **Procurement.** All but one group (the same district office) and one individual noted the difficulties imposed by the procurement process.
- **School Culture.** There was widespread agreement that the culture in many schools, particularly middle and high schools, causes distress for students, teachers, and principals.
- **Low Expectations.** The majority of individuals mentioned the low academic expectations that the state, district, and business community hold for students in Providence.

We explore each of these strengths and weaknesses in full below.

## Successes

### *Reorganization of District Offices*

Several district teams described major efforts to create more rational processes and to develop what several teams called a “customer service” attitude. The Operations team has entered into partnerships with city offices and has brought new resources and a plan to upgrade facilities for schools; Teaching and Learning (including the offices for English Language learners and special education) has created a coherent vision for teaching and learning, as well as data systems that can help assess and place students; the Human Capital division has built a strong team and codified procedures; the Business Office has found efficiencies and virtually eliminated errors in the budgets; Data, Assessment, & Technology is service-oriented and generates impressive data for school leaders and the superintendent. Of the district groups, Teaching & Learning and the Student Supports office focused their comments extensively upon student learning. Indeed, the latter succeeded in putting Advanced Placement in every high school.

Many partners verified the positive work of specific offices, particularly Teaching & Learning and Operations.

**Teaching & Learning** gathered the following representative comments:

- “Its leadership is powerful and is moving things forward” with a “clear vision – and responsive to partners.”
- “They have increased the metrics and high standards.”
- “This team is causing more people to want to work in Providence.”
- “The Keys for Learning” is one of the “most community-driven processes one could imagine.”

There is concern that any changes resulting from the Johns Hopkins report might disrupt this good progress; one partner articulated “lots of stress” because of the superintendent’s departure.

**Operations** was commended for setting a positive and inclusive tone for vendors. Indeed, one group commented that “this relationship has never been better.”

## *Devotion of Some Principals, Teachers, and District Leaders*

Many of the partners we interviewed commented upon the devotion of individual teachers and principals. Representative comments include:

- “Teachers are deeply invested in their students.”
- “There are great relationships between teachers and principals in many schools.”
- “Principals are asked to do too many things – but they stay for the sake of the kids.”
- “Principals are the unsung heroes of our system.”
- “Our team talks principals off the ledge all the time; they’re staying just to help kids. They don’t get enough credit.”

Some schools and principals came in for particular praise. DelSesto Middle School, for instance, received kudos from partners for a strong school culture – and cultural coordinators – and good working relationships amongst staff.

Teachers in the focus group were clearly committed to their students; many of them spend their own money, not only on supplies for students, but also for jackets and coats; many of them noted that they “stay for the kids,” despite the working conditions and difficulties (noted later). For their part, several district leaders broke down in tears when describing the negative impact of the challenges (see below) upon children; a few had left the district for a time but returned out of commitment to the students.

## Challenges

### *Governance and Vision*

All but one of the groups we interviewed believe that the structure of the system is deeply problematic and contributes to the inability of leaders to provide a vision. Most of the interviewees noted that there were “too many masters,” i.e., the School Board, the Mayor, the City Council, the state. One person noted, “There are all these chefs stirring the pot, but the soup never gets made.” (We have listed Procurement as its own theme, but it is clearly related to governance.)

Several specific sub-topics came up again and again, within the general theme of multiple layers of governance.

- *Political patronage.* It is the feeling of many teachers, district leaders, and partners, that political favoritism is woven throughout the system. *The strength of this belief was striking to the review team.* Comments included:
  - “We’re not sure who has whose ear.”
  - “Confronting racism or underperformance is risky. There are backdoor deals that happen and personal friendships are at play.”
  - “Nothing is confidential. If you act as your ‘bold self,’ you could get a call from a council member or senator. Budgets could be impacted.”
  - “It all depends on who you know.”
- *City’s Authority.* Few interviewees (only two individuals) believe the city’s oversight is beneficial. The rest noted that schools have to compete with other items in the city budget and that there is scant educational experience amongst the city’s leadership.

- That the Mayor negotiates the Collective Bargaining Agreement is considered a serious constraint to most district leaders and partners, who talked not only of the Mayor but “the mayor’s team.”
  - One partner noted that the Superintendent is not even party to the CBA negotiation; three partners and district leaders asked, given the lack of meaningful authority, “Who would want to become the superintendent of Providence Public Schools?”
- *District’s Priorities.* Many teachers, partners, and even district leaders feel that the district’s systemic priorities skew toward adults rather than students.
  - Partners believe the compliance side of the district is getting worse.
  - The Human Capital office in particular is perceived as protectionist and also politically protected.
  - Many district leaders and teachers feel that the district “is an organizational organization, not an instructional organization.” There are “too many meetings and grievance hearings, and not enough concern for students.” “There is no priority on instructional practice.”
  - “This organization is upside down. Students need to be the most important element. All systems should be fueling the students at the top of the pyramid. The piece that is missing every time is getting into the classroom to give instructional feedback.”
  - “The growth in district-level hiring has no relevance to student achievement.”
  - While very few interviewees commented upon the current superintendent, those who did were mostly favorable about his vision.
- *Rhode Island Department of Education.* Issues with RIDE’s leadership and priorities include:
  - RIDE focuses on curriculum but not on instruction; it is not interested in professional development.
  - The star system of rating schools makes it more difficult for schools to accept large numbers of ELL and Special Education students.
  - RTI’s are onerous; teachers have to spend too much time documenting everything.
  - RIDE issues unfunded mandates that burden schools (there were several comments about PD requirements).
  - RIDE exerts pressure on districts to lower suspension rates, which affects school culture negatively.
  - RIDE requires federally funded fiscal negotiations “based on 98% of prior year,” which “puts us in the constant amendment process. And the process changes constantly.”
  - The Department does not concern itself with facilities problems – such as lead abatement funding.

The overlapping networks of authority are no doubt related to the lack of vision, which partners and teachers frequently mentioned (with exceptions for particular district offices, noted above).

## Collective Bargaining Agreement

One of the most striking findings was the agreement across all groups *except for one* that two features of the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) are detrimental to student success: the hiring policies and the restriction on professional development days.

*Hiring and dismissal policies.* Of all the issues raised across all interviews, the CBA hiring policies came in for the greatest critique. Every single group and most individuals (*except for one group – a district office*) named the CBA as one of the top most pressing problems for schools.

In general terms, district leaders, teachers, and partners referred to the CBA as “oriented towards staff, not students”; “based on adults, not children”; “a roadblock.” It must be noted that this was highlighted in several conversations as particularly problematic for teachers of color, who are “chased out by other teachers” without apparent consequences.

In specific terms:

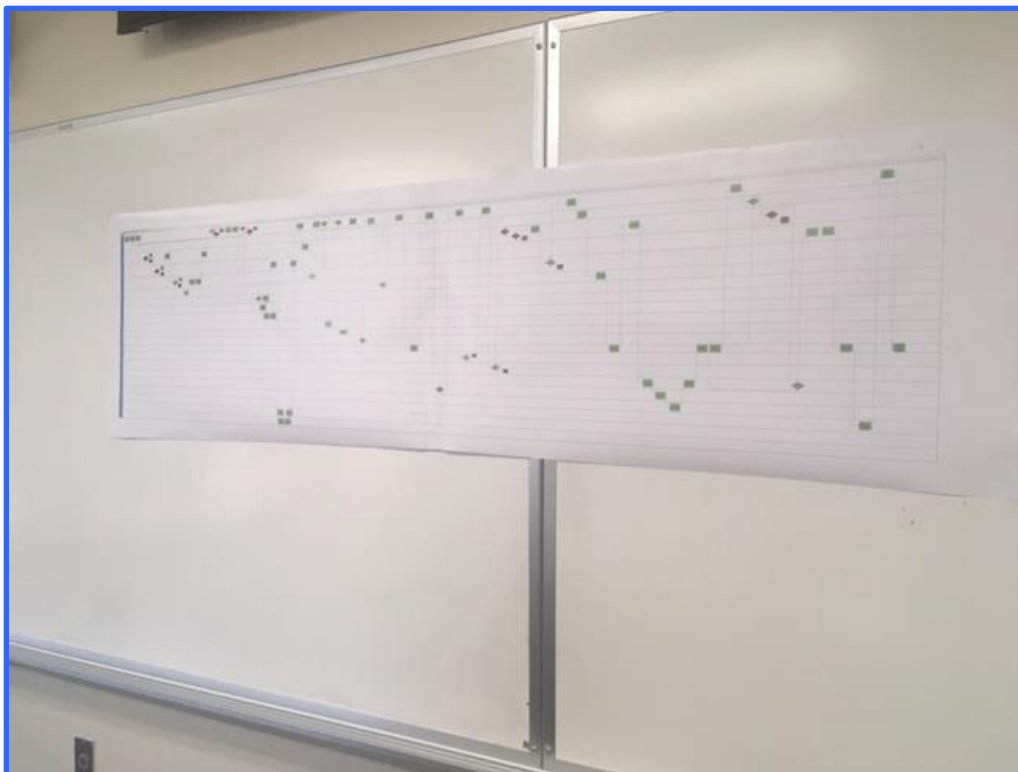
- *The hiring process.*
  - In November or December, principals list their personnel needs for the following year.
  - Teachers in that school, and then across the district, may apply for these jobs based upon seniority.
  - Displaced teachers across the district may apply for these jobs based upon seniority (more on displacement below).
  - Principals *must accept* these applications, provided the certification aligns. Only afterwards may the positions be posted externally.
  - The process is seen to protect poorly-performing teachers and require principals to hire staff who may not align with his or her vision for the school.
- *The dismissal process.*
  - All interviewees except for the Human Capital office noted that there have been no dismissals due to financial constraints or to performance; “the number of teachers who have been let go on account of performance is exactly nil.”
  - The onerous process of documenting low performance was cited as a factor, but several partners and district leaders also claimed that no one is willing to actually dismiss a teacher because “Human Capital says the School Board wouldn’t allow it” or “the Superintendent says it doesn’t look good politically.”
  - Four interviewees, from four different groups, provided a specific number of low-performing teachers (55) who should be let go immediately.
- *Consequences for schools.*
  - The large majority of interviewees consider the consequences of these policies and the seeming lack of political will to be dire.
    - *Loss of morale in schools.* Teachers and leaders alike said that, in every school, teachers know which of their colleagues are not serving students well. Six partners and teachers cited additional experiences with negative pressure from peers, who indicated that “going the extra mile” makes everyone look bad. Specifically, we heard, “Unions discriminate against hard work. They put pressure on those who go above the bare minimum and ask ‘why?’ if you

- want to do more. This is not only teachers, but secretaries and custodians.” One teacher said, “The union contract is a double-edged sword.” Principals are not even allowed to move a teacher to a different grade within a school.
- *Inability to push for excellence.* Partners noted that classroom evaluations are “useless,” since “if a principal has issues with a teacher on performance, the union rep wants to be present in all conversations,” and in the end, “the union will not sign a negative evaluation and will prevent teachers from signing as well.”
  - *Difficulty with recruitment and retention.* Several partners noted that, when a young teacher experiences racist comments from peers, principals feel constrained in addressing it. This results in fewer teacher leaders staying in the district or wanting to become principals. One partner noted that as a result, “AP positions are left open.”
- It would take pages to list all of the comments that were made about this element of the CBA. A few representative comments, echoed across the interviews, are below.
    - “No one can lay off teachers. Ineffective teachers just get shuffled.”
    - “They’ve gamed the system.”
    - “There is no peer critique. Peer coaching is perceived as punitive.”
    - “Even using classroom observations for non-evaluative purposes is discouraged.”
    - “We can’t get rid of teachers; it’s a slap in the face for teachers who come in every day to do a good job. It’s demoralizing.”
    - “If you want to do right by kids, you don’t make a whole lot of friends. There are active and passive pressure. Why do I have to put teachers who don’t do right by kids in front of students?”
    - “We get eyeballed by our colleagues when there’s hard work going on.”
    - “The displacement process is [explicative].”
    - “What we really need are more ELL-certified teachers – but we can’t hire.”

*Constraints on Professional Development.* The CBA allows only one paid day of professional development (PD) a year; everything else must be paid as overtime. We learned about new programs, such as the Advanced Placement coursework, that had been initially funded externally and so could include PD. When external funding goes away, so does the PD. The sense is that Professional Learning Communities are strong but voluntary (some 240 teachers participated last year). At the same time, by all counts, teachers would like more professional development in several core areas: instruction and classroom management, culturally responsive teaching, and social and emotional development, in particular. Many of our interviewees consider the lack of PD to seriously impede teachers’ growth and students’ success.

## *Procurement and Budgetary Process*

Every group we interviewed (except, perhaps understandably, the teachers' group) emphasized the burdens imposed by the procurement process, which entails proposals to multiple city and district bodies. One of the district leaders pinned up a chart of all of the players and steps that any contract must go through before approval:



The “unwieldy” process is compounded by the fact that any request that is more than \$5,000, must be voted upon by the City Council and the School Board. Every element of the process came under fire from district leaders and partners:

- The RFP process “is onerous; even the form is too long.”
  - Because of this, “it is hard to attract high-quality vendors.”
  - “There is no transparency around RFPs.”
  - “The RFPs don’t even include scoring rubrics.”
- Small vendors are handicapped, because they don’t have the staff to attend multiple committee and full board meetings.
  - One partner noted, “It took us two years to get a contract under \$20,000 approved.”
  - Another noted the outdated requirements, such as presenting proposals in triplicate binders with tabs in a specified order.
- “PPSD can enter into only short-term, reactive partnerships. There isn’t the long-term arc of partnership that a three-year contract would allow.”
- The volume of paperwork that results is “stunning.”



- “There are hundreds of contracts, hundreds of purchase orders. Even philanthropic dollars have to go through the process.”
- “The whole process is cumbersome.”
- “There are constant meetings.”
- Invoicing is “problematic; if you don’t bird-dog it, it disappears.”
- There is insufficient attention paid to program evaluation, once a new one is in place.
  - “Data-sharing agreements are impossible to get and the process is cumbersome.”
- Finally, the district’s budgetary process is viewed from the outside as opaque. One district leader contended that any request for more funding should be preceded by “confidence that we’re spending what we have, appropriately.”

A related concern is about the state’s lack of transparency. One group indicated that “the state does not allow access to the data of students currently enrolled in Food Stamps that would automatically make them eligible for USDA programs. This is not only a significant issue for the lunch program which is 100% federally funded, but it has an impact on the overall state aid the district receives.”

### *School Culture – particularly in Secondary Grades*

We encountered widespread agreement that the culture in many schools – particularly middle and high schools - causes distress for students, teachers, and principals. Elementary schools were, by and large, commended for having somewhat less chaos, more instructional support, and “more granular, classroom-level connections.” The middle and high schools, on the other hand, are “a disaster.”

*Discipline.* Many teachers do not feel safe in school, and most partners and district staff concur. There is a general feeling that actions do not have consequences, and that teachers are at physical and emotional risk. One interviewee feels like “the tired, drained teachers of Providence are dragging kids across the finish line.” A few representative comments:

- “My best teacher’s desk was urinated on, and nothing happened.”
- “One of our teachers was choked by a student in front of the whole class. Everybody was traumatized, but nothing happened.”
- “When we refer a student, we get zero response. Kindergartners punch each other in the face – with no consequences.”
- “Principals are not allowed to suspend.”

Some of these issues likely result from pressure to reduce suspensions. Teachers and district leaders feel that children with behavioral problems are allowed to continue, passed from one classroom and school to another. Several noted that the number of social workers in schools is too modest.

- Said one district leader, “the data masks what’s happening. We can SAY we’re reducing suspensions, but we’re just churning middle schoolers.”
- Several teachers note that the plan to implement restorative practices foundered because of lack of PD, but “we’re still supposed to use them. Restorative practices cannot be done unless everybody in the building is trained.”

The Student Affairs Office (SAO) came up frequently in this issue. Teachers are seldom informed when a child in their classroom has been violent, but “if an SAO student skips my class, I’m in trouble.”

- Students are passed from one school to another; “some schools have become dumping grounds for kids.”
- One district leader noted that principals often “bargain” about problem children, doing whatever they can to avoid taking a troublemaker.
- One district leader said simply, “the students run the buildings.”

It must be noted that support staff, including bus drivers, share these concerns. One interviewee noted that “many bus drivers are getting injured,” but when they bring safety concerns to the district, “it falls on deaf ears.”

*Racial mis-match between students and teachers.* The lack of diversity of Providence’s teaching force, and barriers to teachers of color, came up in multiple interviews across multiple stakeholders.

*Lack of instructional core.*

- Most teachers, most district leaders, many partners, and some students mentioned the lack of coherent curriculum – and the related “school autonomy” – as a problem. Two teachers noted with regret that “we have to write the curriculum”; a district leader commented that “we used to have a coherent curriculum. It might not have been the highest quality, but we shared it.”
- All partners, many teachers, and most district leaders noted that principals are “not able to be instructional leaders” because “they are asked to hold grievances during the day; they are required to provide fixed asset reports that are 30 pages long”; and their roles “have been turned into roles of compliance.”
- Almost all interviewees noted that budgetary constraints meant that the number of induction coaches for first-year teachers had been drastically cut, and that few middle and high schools had on site instructional coaches (unlike elementary schools).
- Almost all interviewees highlighted the lack of substitute teachers. When a teacher is absent, the students are often distributed across multiple classrooms.

*Capacity.* Many of the groups cited the following as key problems that must be solved.

- Substitute teachers. There seems to be a chronic shortage of substitute teachers, while many subs are not qualified. One partner said the students were “taught by long-term subs who were yoga instructors, not physics teachers.”
- Adequate bilingual supports. Many parents, partners, and teachers mentioned that the schools had little to no capacity to serve English Language Learners and their parents.

### *Low Expectations*

There is widespread agreement among district leaders and partners that *all parties* (state, district, teachers, and the business community) hold very low expectations for Providence’s students, with

tragic results. The phrase “students are underchallenged” came up almost a dozen times throughout the interviews. Representative comments:

- “There isn’t enough rigor. Students aren’t supported in challenging work or in advanced programs.”
- “We face a culture of low expectations. I visit schools and go out in my car and cry because the expectations of students are so low.”
- “The low expectations are discriminatory and racist” (repeated multiple times).
- “The biggest challenge is translating equity and rigor to the school level.”
- “Equity and excellence are not on the table.”
- “The saddest part is that our students and families know it. Students know they’re not being prepared for success.”

## Interviews with RIDE Staff, Mayor’s Staff, President of the PTU, and Providence Business Stakeholders

The interview team was comprised of:

- Dr. Domingo Morel, Rutgers University, Assistant Professor of Political Science, founder of Latino Policy Institute at Roger Williams University
- Karen Taresevich, Superintendent, West Warwick
- Dr. Angela Watson, Johns Hopkins University

## RIDE Staff Interviews

This interview took place with staff at the Rhode Island Department of Education. A number of those interviewed were visibly distressed at what they reported during the conversation. Several expressed optimism about the new Commissioner.

### Successes

- **Use of data.** Providence has done the most out of all of the districts to use and present data. Their dashboard and capacity to use the data to good effect is strong. Interviewees did add that elementary school principals are the strongest at using the data.
- **Individual schools.** There are many good teachers and principals at the schools, and many assets despite the challenges. There are many challenges but there are strong assets. Schools are less committed to the status quo than the district is.

## Challenges

### *Governance and Trust*

The RIDE staff we interviewed do not believe that the structure of Providence and the relationships between relevant parties are working well. Cooperation between entities is minimal, and the Commissioners historically have to “pick political battles,” which limits what RIDE can “do, implement, and enforce.” Specifically,

- **Constant Change.** There are so many actors who influence Providence, that every change brings about a new mission. Trust is hard to build because “the mission of the relationship between Providence and RIDE” is unclear.
- **District.** Team members hold that there can be intentional obstruction of partnership with RIDE by the district. Additionally,
  - PPSD has money that carries over from year to year, rather than being spent down. Part of the problem is that the relevant office is severely understaffed, with one person who is “hugely overworked.”
  - Academically, PPSD does not have a foundational K-3 reading curriculum in the schools, which results in students’ not being able to read by 5<sup>th</sup> grade.
  - RIDE staff noted that the PPSD office that handles substitute teachers is among the weakest offices.
- **State Board (K-12 Council).** The State Board is “not fighting for RIDE” and is “weak.”
  - Additionally, there is a perception that disagreement with the State Board results in punishment.
  - Finally, the State Board is not helpful on equity and diversity.
- **Superintendent.** The Superintendent does not attend RIDE meetings, which affects their “ability to work together.”
- **RIDE.** RIDE itself has a history of hiding failures, “trying to protect from outside interference,” and not following through.
  - This has resulted in districts, including PPSD, deciding to wait out each new initiative.
  - RIDE also has a history of withholding important information from the State Board.
  - RIDE should focus much more on “curriculum and instruction” rather than “compliance.”
  - RIDE’s unwillingness to have conversations about equity and diversity has consequences for PPSD (see below).

### *Equity and Diversity*

The RIDE staff members indicated that equity conversations are largely absent from the *many layers of governance* that influence Providence. We focus here on their comments about RIDE’s role in this.

- **Avoidance.**
  - RIDE “actively chooses” not to engage in difficult conversations about race and gender.

- There have been problems with “embedded racism and sexism” that were “routine and covered up.”
- RIDE does not have a common and consistent rubric to promote diversity and equity.
- **Consequences.**
  - Many people in Providence feel that “RIDE cannot contribute to Providence’s discussion on race, equity, and diversity, because RIDE doesn’t engage in those conversations themselves.”
  - There is insufficient focus within RIDE upon helping higher education to develop pipelines of teachers of color.

## Mayor’s Staff

The Mayor’s staff agrees with the consensus view across interviews, that there are too many “masters” involved in school governance. However, they believe that the widespread inefficacies mean that “someone has to get things done.” Often times, that “falls on us in the City.” The staff’s perspective on each of the major entities who work with the district:

- **RIDE.** There are no significant problems in working with RIDE.
- **PPSD.** They cite “multiple issues” in working with PPSPD:
  - **Constant change.** “Central Administration is the place where good ideas go to die.”
  - **Negative relationship.** The Mayor’s team believes that PPSPD is “hostile;” there is “active push against the Mayor’s office.” One member said that often “working with nobody was easier,” so they by-pass the district and works with schools directly.
  - **Disconnected.** Most district staff do not visit schools and thus “have no sense of urgency.” Furthermore, the district regularly “turns down money” because they do not have capacity.
  - **Ineffective.** When asked about the frequent charge that the Mayor overstepped his role, the staff averred that they had to step up when “nothing was getting done.” They “didn’t want the extra work,” but when the district was unresponsive, someone in the City had to take it upon themselves.
- **Superintendent** “does not deal with logistics.”
- **Mayor.** They perceive the Mayor as engaged; he “goes to a different school every week.”

### The staff’s hopes for the future:

- A clear plan for the district, with responsibilities clearly defined.
- A skills audit at the middle-to upper-level management in the district. There is significant overlap in roles, but also areas that are under-staffed.
- Update central office to accommodate the new demographics, e.g., Spanish-speaking staff.
- Screen all students for “social determinants of health;” students “do not have access to sex education.”
- Provide comprehensive Pre-K.
- Fix the procurement process. The multiple approvals required for any item above \$5,000 “is a nightmare.”

- Conduct annual “retreats,” with periodic check-ins, between City and district to address lack of communication and coordination.

## President of the Providence Teachers’ Union (Maribeth Calabro)

The President’s overall perspective is that PPSD and the union are working effectively, but that the Mayor and RIDE are not.

### Successes

- **Personalized learning:** use of Chromebook and Summit. She acknowledges that, when it works, students could work on their own and then receive small-group instruction or be one-on-one with teachers.
- **The union-assisted, five-year strategic plan.** The union president felt like it wasn’t going to be a “one and done” but did incorporate “new ideas and new people.” They are two years into the plan, and she thinks people support it and things are better.

### Challenges

#### *Some issues with Teaching and Learning*

- **Teachers “have PTSD”** from mass firing and “sharp pendulum swings,” e.g., from minute-to-minute classroom pacing, then complete autonomy. Teachers no longer trust that initiatives will be followed through.
- **Substitute teachers.** RIDE needs to work harder to create pipelines for teachers of color, including for substitute teachers of color.
- **Professional development.** Teachers need more PD – not only on instruction, but also trauma, cultural competency, dealing with grief. The Race to the Top grant supported PD, but it is now over.

#### *Governance*

- **RIDE.**
  - RIDE’s mandates change frequently. She worked with Commissioner Gist on an educator evaluation model with an effectiveness rating tied to certification, indicators and grades...then with Commissioner Wagner, the pendulum swung the other way: it became “us versus them, setting Providence up to fail.”
  - RIDE has unrealistic timelines. She gave the example of RICAS, which were taken in April of last year, but the results only came in February of this year and then teachers “were expected to move the needle in six weeks.”
- **Mayor.** The President views the Mayor as a “detriment” to the district’s progress. Specifically,
  - The Mayor micro-manages, including interviewing all non-union employees.
  - He has an unfavorable view of the union and creates an “us vs them” atmosphere.

- He shows favoritism, such as giving a signing bonus of \$250,000 to a new bus company.

## Business Leaders' Focus Group

The business leaders with whom we met described a school system that vastly underperforms. They noted that the Chamber of Commerce has an education committee since the “key to economic development is improved schools,” but at the same time, these leaders feel unsure of what they can do to make the school system better. Representative comments include:

- When asked to rate PPSD schools on a rating of 1-5 with five being the highest, all present agreed on a “1” rating for the schools.
- This group of interviewees said clearly that they are ready to help, but didn’t really know what to do, and don’t want to spend money to no effect or put band-aids on a broken system.
- One member said (to agreement from the others), “The mission of schools doesn’t seem to be clear. We aren’t all marching in the same direction.”
- They expressed concern about PPSD: “You drive by here (PPSD) at 2:30pm and the parking lot is empty. You drive by the schools and the parking lots are empty.”

## Success

An internship at one of the high schools has helped to improve the dropout rate.

## Challenges

- The absence of teachers of color, and the lack of a strong teacher pipeline, were referenced as a major challenge.
- Wrap-around services are critically needed, especially for ELL students.
- Schools needed more autonomy in purchasing and procurement.
- The district needs additional funds from the state.



## PPSD District Site Visit

Leadership: City Council, Providence School Board, Providence School  
Superintendent, Mayor  
May 20 – May 24, 2019

### Summary

The Leadership review team was comprised of five members:

- Dr. David Steiner, Johns Hopkins University, and Dr. Angela Watson, Johns Hopkins University
- Superintendent Karen Tarasevich, West Warwick
- Dr. Domingo Morel, Rutgers University, Assistant Professor of Political Science, founder of Latino Policy Institute at Roger Williams University
- Dr. Jaime Aquino, Distinguished Educator, Rochester NY

The interviews were conducted on-site in Providence. Team members interviewed representatives from the City Council and the School Board, and Drs. Steiner and Aquino conducted the interview with Superintendent Christopher N. Maher.

We summarize below the information and opinions that were shared with us during our interviews. Because we believe it important to capture the perspectives of different governing bodies separately, the following summaries are divided accordingly. We have grouped the responses into similar headings so as to facilitate comparative and comparable review.<sup>11</sup>

### Mayor Jorge Elorza<sup>12</sup>

As leader of the education system in Providence, Mayor Elorza summarized his position thus: “I ran on the platform of education.... Education is my priority.... The buck stops with me. I am the one the residents hold accountable.”

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<sup>11</sup> We interviewed council and board members in groups, so they did not get to hear what other colleagues shared with us. We did try to share observations of later groups with earlier ones, and indicate below where there was a marked difference of view from one or more members of each group.

<sup>12</sup> Direct quotations are so marked. Other statements are paraphrases based upon the recording (with the Mayor’s permission) of the discussion.



He stated “I would be comfortable sending my child to any one of our elementary schools except one. It is middle school where things go off the rails.”<sup>13</sup> His grade for the school system is “a C.”

## Successes

Under his tenure, the Mayor feels the system’s successes include:

- **Restructuring the district offices.** The restructuring entailed putting people directly into the schools and giving them more autonomy. The Mayor himself regularly visits schools.
- **Purchase of digital devices for every child.** The focus on personalized learning and instruction is designed to “untether learning from the schools.”
- **City-wide community gatherings.**
- **School-culture coordinators.** The coordinators in middle schools (and one high school) are “younger, from the communities, and generally minorities.” They “have been well received by the students,” although he acknowledges that they are overloaded.
- **Wrap-around services.** Because on his understanding that 20% of a child’s life is spent in school while the other 80% out of school, the Mayor has sought “to invest in things such as afterschool learning, summer learning programs, and social and emotional learning supports” – although he wants to focus more on personalized learning/instruction.
  - His belief is that you get “the most bang for your buck” when investing in support for children “outside school learning.” He has been “frustrated” by the lack of results from in-school investments.

## Challenges

The Mayor acknowledged general frustration with the “results.” He “[does] not want to be the caretaker of a failing system.” The Mayor noted the following impediments to success for the district:

- **Governance.** There are “too many cooks in the kitchen” and “so many levels of review/meddling.”
- **Antiquated systems.** “Status quo is not cutting it.”
  - “We need additional flexibility in the system.”
  - “The system is two generations behind and has not kept up with innovations.”
  - The use of technology and data needs to improve. The district is “primitive with data.”
- **Too few strong schools.** The Mayor acknowledges that more high schools have to be like Classical.
  - “If it weren’t for Classical, I don’t know where I would be.”
  - It’s “seen as the one hope for progressing.”
  - For “low-income kids, it’s their one shot.”

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<sup>13</sup>See analysis of 8<sup>th</sup>-grade results and middle school observations.

## The Mayor's General Operating Process

According to the Mayor, he defers to the Superintendent for school-based decisions. He holds no real conversations regarding particular principals, but, rather, holds the superintendent accountable for the principals hired. Therefore, he tries to find the “Coach Cooley” of superintendents.

In response to a question about granting school autonomy in the face of years of troubling results, the Mayor responded that: “A strong school culture allows for better buy in. The principal is responsible for setting the school culture.” He added, “I believe in autonomy because I have seen the results of principals’ [using it effectively].”

He tries to interview and/or meet with key school department personnel. The Mayor said his process with the district is identical to that with his other departments. He said that what the review committee had been told about his interviewing crossing guards was not true.

## Departing Superintendent Christopher N. Maher

Superintendent Maher met with Dr. David Steiner and Dr. Jaime Aquino for an interview. The superintendent also provided Dr. Steiner with a copy of a letter to the Providence community that he had written in announcing his departure from the superintendency of PPSD.

### Successes

The Superintendent focused the conversation on successes. These items overlap quite strongly with those cited in his letter to the community:

- More funding for [LEP students](#) (also referenced as ELLs, or English Language Learners).
- Almost doubled the number of students taking [college credit-bearing courses](#) in high school.
- [New policies](#): The Racial and Ethnic Equity Policy, the new Code of Conduct, and the Gender Expansive Student Policy.
- The addition of [ethnic studies courses](#) (at the request of the students).
- Expanded [Social and Emotional](#) supports and mental health programs.
- Major increase in [personalized learning](#) (largely through the use of the Summit platform).
  - The superintendent spent a lot of time on personalized learning in the interview; he called it “a plus.”
  - When asked whether personalized learning could be tied to academic outcomes, he said “there have been pockets of gains.”
- Expansion of [summer learning opportunities](#) with the Mayor’s office and through the “By all Means” initiative.
- Expansion of [advanced academic](#) programs in middle school.
- [Professional development](#) for teachers on issues of racism and trauma-informed instruction.

## Challenges

The Superintendent pointed to several challenges to moving performance in PPSD.

### *Governance and Leadership*

The Superintendent said, “There is no alignment of priorities,” and just “too many masters in PPSD.” Throughout the interview, he stressed frustration with the need for micro-management of every initiative through endless layers, players and budget limits.

He said that new expenses had been incurred in the millions of dollars with only a fraction then provided for payment. He mentioned an example of “\$55 million in new costs vs \$3.5 million in new revenue generated in 2011.” Overall, the Superintendent said that endless “trivia” occupy massive amounts of time. The key problem, the Superintendent said, was that “no one wanted to lose control.”

With respect to specific entities:

- **School Board.** He was not complimentary about the Board and said that they tend to micro-manage the district.
- **RIDE.** The Superintendent said RIDE was understaffed and “unable to differentiate their support.”
- **The Mayor.**
  - The Mayor’s relationship with the City Council is not always straightforward, e.g., a playground against an expenditure for a school.
  - The Mayor is “often at odds with RIDE.”
  - The Superintendent spoke for some time about the Mayor, who he said had taken over negotiation of the school contract and negotiations, and who held meetings with a large list of individuals inside the system, including clerks and laborers.<sup>14</sup>
- **City Council.** The Council micro-manages every expenditure above \$5,000. Furthermore, it doesn’t meet in August, while the School Board often doesn’t meet in July, resulting in months without action.
- **Superintendent’s office.** The Superintendent is “often viewed as a department of the Mayor.” “I often feel I don’t have the authority.”

### *Low Expectations*

The Superintendent said that the biggest single problem in PPSD was “low expectations” throughout the district. The most significant causes are:

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<sup>14</sup> The superintendent referred to the Mayor’s interviewing “crossing guards” as an example of micro-management. This example was used by several other individuals on the school board interviewed by the review team. As cited above, the Mayor explicitly denied that this occurred.

- [The change in demographics](#), which has put severe strain on the system (the ELL student population has risen exponentially in the 2010-2019 years).
- [The Collective Bargaining Agreement](#) is a “thick” teachers’ contract which gives a green light for grievances on “almost anything” and funds only one PD day per year. The Superintendent contrasted this with 24 days of PD per year at Achievement First. This reality leaves teachers unprepared.
- A “[massive teacher shortage](#)” with an inadequate teacher pipeline. The Superintendent noted that last year Rhode Island College had produced only six certified science teachers.
- [Political patronage](#). Personal favors and relationships have an outsized influence in the district on matters small and large, such as extra dollars for ELL students, which finally came through a personal relationship with the Speaker.
- [Parents are left out](#). Finally, the Superintendent said that facing all of this, parents’ voices were often “spurned.” He heard from parent after parent, “We don’t know who to go to.”

### *Teaching and Learning*

The Superintendent stressed that changing what is taught in the classroom is “very hard.” He said the old materials and curriculum were wholly inadequate. Teachers had also used Direct Instruction, or built their own curriculum, or followed whatever their particular school was doing. He had been pushing for limited curriculum autonomy that would enable teachers to choose from an approved short list but noted that this was a work in progress.

In terms of the teaching corps, the Superintendent said that a large number of teachers had been in the system for some twenty years, and had thus signed up when the population of PPSD was different.

It was in these circumstances that he had supported (and continues to support) the emphasis on digitally-based personalized learning. He believes that effective curriculum has to be presented in different, non-traditional ways, and that this is now increasingly taking place.

### *U.S. Department of Justice*

The superintendent briefly discussed the findings of the U.S. Department of Justice that PPSD had provided inadequate services to ELL students – including the commitment to hire more teachers who were ELL certified. The Superintendent pointed out the “completely inadequate” historic level of funding support for this population from the state – which had only recently supplied PPSD with funding for ELL students.

The Superintendent focused on the circumstances of PPSD students. He acknowledged that despite progress and good effort, there were still far too many instances in which the system was “failing to protect the civil rights of students.” He pointed to the fact that when a student was suspended once in middle school, he or she was six times more likely to drop out of high school, and that despite some progress, suspension rates were still high.

## City Council

The review team conducted three sessions of interviews with Council members. We found widespread consensus on the successes and challenges below. Where there was divergence, we have noted it as such.

### Successes

The Council agreed that *specific schools* are doing well. Examples include one elementary school that offers well-funded after-school programs, a “21<sup>st</sup>-Century grant,” and volunteer students and faculty from a nearby university. It’s a “full-service school with an open door to community organizations. One high school “is a shining star.” One Council member noted that “advanced academics have expanded into new schools.”

They also agreed that *charter schools* work well for many students: in one charter school the “amount of support for children was night and day more than in the district schools.” However, there is *divergence* on whether to expand charter schools or to pause their growth. One member said: “Charter schools keep parents in the city; the main loser is parochial schools.” In response to a question about a large expansion of charters, members were cautious.

- One member said: “The pro would be we could get rid of all the obstacles and red tape and drama; but at the same time, [an issue would arise as to] how to protect the students from the wrong charter CEO.”
- Another said: “A part of me would be sad - because it’s sort of like the family you know, right? At the same time, if we do want to reset and start over, if we went the charter route, we would circumvent a lot of issues. [The question is] could we go that route? I don’t see the Providence Teachers Union going anywhere, so that is something we would have to deal with.”
- In response, a further member of the board said “I agree with that assessment; I think we owe it to the students, owe it to the parents to provide them the best possible education. If this were an option, I would not close the door on it, but would proceed with caution.”

### Challenges

There was general consensus that the following areas represent barriers to the district’s (and students’) success: Governance, Academic Outcomes, and Facilities/Procurement.

### Governance

Council members spent the majority of time discussing problems with governance and management. As one member put it, “Who is responsible? Because it’s so unclear, all are responsible.” We heard repeated comments to the effect of:

- “Politics plays too much of a role in our educational system”
- “[There is a] circling of the wagons.”
- “We are in a crisis and we don’t seem to be able to figure it out.”
- “[There are] “too many hands in the cookie jar [and] too many hands in the pot.”
- “We don’t have a solid plan with good policy;” “We change strategies before we see them through.”
- “We are worried about a repeat of Central Falls.”
- “I don’t know who they [the parents and teachers of PPSD] think is in charge.”

Their comments upon specific bodies and roles include:

- **School Board.** There was close to unanimous agreement that “the governing structure should be the School Board.”
  - Multiple council members noted that a forthcoming meeting with the school board would be a first. According to several members, that meeting is happening because the organization Young Voices presented data to the School Board and the City Council (separately). One member thought the meeting might be connected to this current review. There was general agreement that “we get no input from the School Board.”
  - Various members made suggestions for improvement: “What if we had a couple of Council members embedded on the Board? [What about] “student representatives on the School Board?” Several agreed that “representation on the School Board from a wider selection of the neighborhoods” would help.
- **Council Itself.** One member said (with no push back): “We don’t have that much power,” but that the “City Council has to act as system-navigators because of so many challenges.”
  - There was frustration and uncertainty about how to make the Council more effective; most members were not convinced that transitioning to an elected board would improve their impact (one member disagreed).
  - The great majority agreed with some version of the following quotation: their “engagement should be approving the budget, ensuring the school district has the resources they need to implement programming, to hire, etc. While the Council needs to know what’s happening since it’s providing money, there should be a quarterly/annual report to share that goals/deliverables are being met.”
  - There was also strong agreement on the limits of their own role in education in Providence. Several acknowledged that “we over-complicate things;” “we need to stay in our lane.” One member said: “[the] only role of the City Council should be accountability.”

- Members articulated their need to learn more about education, with one member stating that he/she did not have the necessary background.
  - “Education policy is not my thing.”
  - “I don’t know if these are good decisions.”
- *Divergence.* Most members believe the Council spends little time on education. *Several disagreed.*
- **School Board.** The Council agrees that more authority should be ceded to the School Board:
  - “In terms of overall governance structure, [we] can be a little intrusive at times – the school district and school board should have more autonomy around decisions they are able to make (hiring practices, implementing programs).”
- **Mayor.** All members recognized the Mayor as the head of the district.
  - While the Council appoints the school committee, all agreed it was really the Mayor’s pick.
    - “Unless there is a big issue about the person, it is generally approved.”
    - One said of their involvement, “It’s a rubber stamp.”
  - There was agreement that the Mayor was over-involved in interviewing school personnel, and that his focus was on what happens outside of the schools. There was also agreement, in two of the three interviews that, while the Mayor held up the contract as innovative, “there was no innovation.”
  - Several members said that they had been telling the Administration for some time that the School Board make-up needed to better reflect the make-up of the city of Providence (there is “a 62% Latinx population, but only one member of board is Latinx until this past February”).
- **Superintendent.** Council members said relatively little about the Superintendent, although there was general agreement that he was hampered by the Mayor and the Council.
  - There was a view that perhaps the situation would be helped by monthly meetings between the Superintendent and parents.
  - In one group, there was a suggestion, with no push back, that the Superintendent’s contract should be extended from three to five years.

### *Academics*

There was consensus on the fact that the academic outcomes were poor to very poor. The Council’s overall assessment of the district performance, on a 1-5 scale with 5 being the highest, varied from “3 - based on hope” to “a solid 2.” In terms of what grade parents as a whole might give the school system, one said it “*could* be a B- but might be a D now.” When asked about what grade Latinx parents would give the system, all but one council members agreed that “Hispanics might grade it lower than a C or a D.” Remarks include:

- “There is utter frustration....we are losing the middle class.”
- The School Board “is almost afraid to be elected.”

When asked to account for the low grades, Council members provided the following answers:

- **Challenging population.** Council members noted the very challenging social and economic situation confronting families in Providence. They mentioned concentrated poverty, the



high percentage of LEP and special needs students, and the fact that the city was working to educate children from all over the world including some countries without written languages (countries of origin include parts of Africa, Haiti, south Asia, and South America), and indigenous students. For example,

- Multiple members spoke about the LEP<sup>15</sup> student population and the “failure” to staff the LEP office properly. One said that the LEP community must think we are “a terrible failure.” Several members spoke to the severe lack of bilingual staff in the district.
- There was agreement that “Title VI compliance isn’t good.” Several members spoke of the lack of special education teachers, and one remarked that “teachers have to coach parents on how to get the service.”
- Furthermore, members agreed that teachers and staff had not been trained in how to support these new students.
- **Collective Bargaining Agreement.** One member said (without pushback) that the “teacher contract was not transformative.” This comment related to the concern that professional development suffered, as there was only one mandatory PD day during orientation.
  - “PD is challenging.”
  - With affirmation from others present, one member asked, “What about cultural competency, social emotional support, learning about the curriculum?”
- **Frequent change.** Members noted that testing models had constantly changed over the last few years, and that the district did not have a uniform curriculum. “That’s a problem.”
  - **Divergence.** While some Council members mentioned that there were “significant issues around teaching and training,” and that “instruction is not being taken seriously,” others stressed that most teachers were doing their best in very difficult circumstances.

### *Facilities and Procurement*

- There was near unanimous (with one exception) agreement that the requirement for the Council to approve new contracts of \$5,000 or above was not effective.
- All agreed that the facilities required urgent, and major, attention.
  - One said that “in the middle-class areas, parents had raised the money for urgent repairs.”
  - Another spoke about “deplorable conditions in certain schools.”

## **City School Board**

The review team conducted several group interviews, one individual interview, and one phone interview with School Board members. We found widespread agreement about successes and challenges. Where views diverged, we have noted as such.

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<sup>15</sup> “Limited English Proficiency.” In our interviews, some individuals used ELL (English Language Learner) to denote the same group of students. We thus use the terms interchangeably in this report.



## Successes

There was general agreement that *charter schools* have been successful.

- One Board member mentioned the many days of PD that Achievement First charter schools in Providence provide, in comparison to the single day of PD in the district schools.
- Members spoke of Achievement First schools as having high “standards of excellence.”
  - “There is a clear vision, there is a clear expectation, there is a clear function.”
  - “You knew from the minute you walked in that there were expectations, that the teachers were all on the same page, that parents were welcome. There were very deliberate open-door days.”

A few Board members noted the *school-based health clinics* they had put in place, and others the *reduction in school suspensions*, as notable successes.<sup>16</sup> Finally, while there was consensus that many aspects of the Collective Bargaining Agreement hurt the district, members referred positively to *specific areas of cooperation with the Providence Teachers Union* and the PTU President herself, who “rolled up her sleeves” to address partnerships on chronic student and teacher absenteeism and suspensions.

## Challenges

The School Board members found challenges in almost every domain of the district. Representative comments, echoed repeatedly, include:

- “Operationalization/execution/communication/accountability is a challenge.....to get to the school level is a challenge.”
- “The Superintendent and the cabinet are weak.”
- Collective Bargaining: “The School Board should be able to bargain with the union.”
- “Who is leading? Strong school leadership is not there.... It doesn’t trickle down.”
- “Should we wait for regulation and wait for the district? Well, that hasn’t worked.”
- “It boils down to leadership, from the top down: leadership at the state level, district level, the school level, and setting high expectations in the classroom.”
- “Providence seems to be the stepping stone for people’s career in managing an urban district.”

When asked whether they would put their own child in a district school, one replied that the dire needs overwhelmed the schools:

I like public schools; I am a product of public school. But I see my friends and their kids going through elementary school. The stuff that elementary school kids are going through is astounding to me: a lot of trauma, a lot of trauma - and teachers are not

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<sup>16</sup> While some Members noted the restorative practices as a positive, others acknowledged the “problems with implementation.”

equipped to deal with any of it. It is just seen as behavioral issues; trauma is not recognized; learning disabilities, all kinds of conditions, are not recognized as social or emotional issues. They are seen as behavioral issues.

There was general agreement that the following areas represent meaningful barriers to student success: Governance, Academic Outcomes, and Facilities/Procurement.

### Governance

Board members agree that the current structure is unwieldy. One member summed it up: “The whole structure and organizational chart are very confusing.”

Comments include:

- “There is no one entity where the buck stops.”
- “You have to jump through a lot of hoops: School Board, City Council, Mayor. You may never be able to get through the finish line.”

On specific actors:

- **Mayor.** Board members expressed no personal animus, but *no one thought that the relationship between the Board and the Mayor was working especially well.* “He doesn’t trust Board leadership.” Specific concerns included:
  - Lack of communication.
    - “I think the break in communication came when the mayor stopped meeting with the leadership team on a monthly basis; a standing agreement is that there should be monthly meetings as a conduit to get to the Board.”
    - “I have had three interactions with him in three years: when I got appointed, reappointed, and at the Board retreat.”
  - Mayor’s over-involvement.
    - He “runs a parallel process, interviewing not only superintendents but also crossing-guards.”<sup>17</sup>
    - Our prior superintendent “would still be with us” if the “relationship between her and the Mayor had been a healthy one.”
  - Mayor’s initiatives “dilute the resources” so that they are not effective. On summer learning: “We have no business running summer learning if we can’t do the school year well.”
- **City Council.** The Board considers the City Council to be “part of the problem.”
  - “They think they know more about education, and they want to impose.”
  - “It’s political machinations.”
  - An upcoming joint meeting with the City Council, organized by Young Voices, has no support on the Board.
- **RIDE.** RIDE’s role was usually reported in negative terms.

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<sup>17</sup> Note: the Mayor explicitly denied this.

- “Leadership” and the “revolving door” at RIDE are “major problems.”
- RIDE issues new mandates “constantly.”
- RIDE focuses on “individual schools, not systemic change.”
  - This means we have to “fix these five schools or RIDE will take over; or fix these three schools or we lose federal funding.”
  - “Why aren’t we looking at system-wide reform?”
  - The focus on individual schools (e.g., school turnaround models) makes improvement too contingent upon funding, school buy-in, and good management at the school level.
- RIDE is making it harder to recruit and retain strong teachers through “raising standards [which] lowers the pool. Getting an SAT score in the top 50% is discriminatory, even racist.”
  - Instead, we need a “statewide pool.”
  - Providence “can’t fish beyond our borders because RIDE has made it virtually impossible to do so. Strong teachers go to private schools or charter schools because they can’t get the certifications they need.”
- **District.**
  - The district constantly introduces new ideas and mandates.
  - The district is avoidant; they provide the School Board with aggregate data only: “We mostly hear about the gains the district is making, the things the district is trying – but [the district] shies away from presenting about the real issues. Because folks are hesitant to come before the Board and present fully about what some of the issues are, the Board is not fully informed.”
- **The Superintendent.** There was little direct blame placed on the superintendent for the academic outcomes in PPSD.
  - Rather, the consensus view was that “the superintendent is not being given the opportunity to do his actual job.”
  - The Superintendent is unsupported: he should have a “second-in-command.”
- **School Board itself.** The Board is frustrated by its lack of authority – and wants more – while at the same time some members acknowledge their own limitations. There was agreement that Board members need guidelines and training for what to look like, aside from the six hours a year provided to them by the Rhode Island School Committee Association, which they agreed was “terrible. It’s bland; it’s the same people giving out the same information; it’s never relevant.”
  - As far as limits of authority:
    - At least one member of the Board believes that but for the Collective Bargaining Agreement the Board would “be able to make the necessary changes we haven’t been able to make.... We w[ould] do a good job.” This member speculated that the new RIDE administration might be considering a take-over or receivership of PPSD and said that, the Board should be given that responsibility instead.

- The Board believes that it is tough to hold them responsible for everyone's performance throughout PPSD; they don't believe it's their job.
- However, there is strong agreement from Board members that their job is to hire, fire, and evaluate the superintendent.
- There is frustration that "we don't even evaluate teachers based on learner outcomes."
- There is frustration at the types of work the Board has to do instead of education, such as terminations and grievances, but especially "contracts [which] occupy huge time - there were 42 contracts to review at our last meeting."
- As far as weaknesses:
  - Although there is an executive leadership team, "The rest of the board doesn't know what's going on... there are no goals." Another said: "We pass policies but are very unsure about what happens on the ground." There was some disagreement about a "divide" between the leadership team and the other members, with the former group pointing to their willingness to spend "more time dealing with district issues" and the latter claiming some exclusion from the work of the leadership.
  - Their service as "community liaisons" between schools and central offices is often seen as "micromanaging."
  - The Board members want more training about social and emotional education.
- *Review Team Note.* Whether caused by lack of authority or lack of information, the Board members were either ill-informed or did not know which kinds of curricula are being used in schools. The review team leader (Dr. Steiner) raised the issue of curriculum, because the school teams reported that a great variety of materials are being used, often within in the same school and grade-levels.
  - One member of the Board indicated that the vetting system in place should make such variety impossible.
  - Another said curriculum was purely a matter of school autonomy.
  - Another member said, "I would like the Board to be more involved in curriculum."
  - A fourth member claimed that the curriculum selections "go through the finance committee," but not the full Board, and thus there is limited oversight.

The review team noted these different responses, which directly reflect the varying degree to which the Board knows what's happening on the ground, knows district policy, and thinks it should be involved in policy matters of this kind.

### Academic Outcomes

The Board members all agreed that the performance needle has not moved and cited “what we have done until now” as “tinkering around the margins.” In summary, “We have not moved the needle on test scores or a culture of excellence.” Asked to evaluate the academic performance of PPSD on a 1-5 scale with 5 being the highest, the *consensus answer* was “2.”<sup>18</sup> Members were quick to say that this did not reflect “lack of effort put in by the teachers and students; we have the most resilient teachers and students on the face of this earth.”

But we also heard that no one is giving the Board real pushback about academic outcomes – something the reviews found very notable.

The Board members suggested various causes for the academic underperformance:

- **Money.** Almost everyone said that money is a problem, or even that it is the number one problem.
  - Some district offices, such as External Affairs, are “understaffed,” and the Family Engagement Office is in “dire need of resources.”
  - One member noted that “Some schools only have one social worker for half the day; our kids’ social emotional needs are not being met.”
  - While one member noted that “it’s not just about resources,” there was consensus around the fact that “cuts in finances to the district over the years have hindered the district’s ability to perform. There is another round of cuts this year; who do the cuts effect? They effect the children; more funding would be needed.”
  - There was strong agreement that the funding for LEP students was vastly inadequate. One said “we finally got \$5 million – really?”
  - Many are concerned that the district’s low performance and dysfunction push away private philanthropy: “For two years, have told the district to determine the ask for funding – we will go to the Governor’s office to ask; we will bring in the union and leadership asking for input. But the district doesn’t operationalize that. They leave money at the table.” One member pointed out that “private funders are not going to give money to the district: we need an education foundation [philanthropy].”
  - But while some members drew a causal line from the money issues to *morale* issues, no one explicitly blamed the lack of funds for the low expectations (see below). As one member put it, “Outputs don’t match inputs. Whatever measure of success that we are using – which keeps changing, which is a massive problem – you would expect that our outputs would be different. Something has to change.”
- **Inadequate preparation and support for teaching and learning.** Members were very clear that “individual teachers are heroic,” but that many are “cynical and worn down.” They acknowledged that the social context of Providence has changed, and that teachers are not prepared.
  - Teacher pipelines are “horrible; there is no innovative leadership.” This is particularly acute when it comes to pipelines for teachers of color.

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<sup>18</sup> One member said “a 3, because I believe in the public school system.”

- There was strong agreement about a deep problem with diverse teacher recruitment and support. One member remarked: “There isn’t a concerted effort, not to retain teachers, not to retain teachers of color; I have a general sense that there aren’t enough people of color in the pipeline to meet the needs.”
  - One member cited that teachers of color sometimes face “immediate supervisors” who are “part of the problem.”
- **School Discipline.**<sup>19</sup> Multiple members shared frustration with student support services. One member claimed that it got so bad that the Board took over the responsibility from the Superintendent.
  - “We kept hearing about behaviors in the classroom, with the charge that there was no funding, no supports for teachers, no solutions came after a year. So we got five principals in the room, the union balked, got the union in the room and agreed on the goals, showed the numbers and found out who was getting the referrals, and went to [the principals] and offered them space so referrals were in-district.”
- **Teacher Morale.** There was a consensus that this is a challenge. Board members attributed it to lack of direction, lack of consistency, new plans, new standardized test, churn in leadership, and lack of teacher PD.
- **Social Challenges.** Many Board members cited the difficulties that families in Providence face:
  - “We have a variety of students coming from different backgrounds – not just language, but trauma, refugees, unaccompanied minors, PTSD, learning disabilities, sex trafficking, so much more than just language barriers. Some kids don’t know how to read or write in their native language; the issues are a lot broader and more complex.”
  - “There are so many issues our students deal with – poverty, trauma, homelessness, etc., and society has not addressed these issues.”
  - **Divergence.** One Board member “respectfully disagreed” that the challenges presented by a highly diverse student body are new, noting that “we have had diversity since forever...but the system has always failed.” Other Board members worried out loud that the student population would be used to “excuse” low performance.
- **Leadership and governance.** Many members view the low achievement as a consequence of the governance issues outlined above. “There is no hiding behind the fact that we have not moved the needle on test scores, on creating a culture of excellence...[none] of that has happened. This goes back to overall leadership and what that includes, what happens at the district and the school level; there is a disconnect between the district and the schools.”

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<sup>19</sup> PPSD [states that](#): “PPSD uses a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework to promote a safe, supportive and positive school climate that helps students develop the skills they need to be successful in school.”

### *Collective Bargaining Agreement*

There was widespread agreement that the Collective Bargaining Agreement is a problem for schools. Specifically,

- The criterion-based hiring practices prevent stronger schools.
  - “Ineffective teachers just get moved to a different building, and the problem follows them.”
  - One member articulated it this way: “This is where macro and micro get confused; helping schools to improve and move in the right direction includes [the importance of] hiring and firing. We negotiated with the union about this, and then the union contract became the driving force behind that policy. So we took what was supposed to be a robust policy, and then it was backwards-mapped into the contract. Because of all the additional layers put on, principals’ hands are tied and fewer positions are available for real criterion-based hiring.”
- The CBA prevents meaningful professional development; the “thick contract” causes the lack of PD.
- The Board wishes it could have been involved in the negotiation process.
  - “Collective bargaining should be under the review of the School Board,” so we could “set policy that has teeth.”
  - “The Board has a really good relationship with the teachers and the teachers’ union, and it would have been good for the Board to lead [negotiation.] It could have been less public. We understand the needs of the teachers in the classroom and could have anchored the contract in terms of their needs.”

### *Procurement and Facilities*

Every single member raised the issue of the *\$5,000 limit on contracts* exempted from review by the City Council. While we were told that the origins of this requirement went back to corrupt decision-making in the past, *the policy had only one lukewarm defender*. One Board member said: “This is just such an inefficient use of time, and not necessarily for a better result.”

There was unanimous agreement that *the school buildings were a massive problem*. One member said:

They are crumbling, there’s mold, there’s water coming into the building; I went to visit [an] elementary school and was walking around the building and there’s paint peeling. A pipe actually broke while I was there and water came flowing down. Kids running around calling out about what’s happening, only one maintenance person. In the basement of the school is just storage, and part of that is these water cannisters from World War II, just sitting there...it’s just a sinking ship.

It should be noted several Board members expressed the hope that things could get better, *on the condition that trust were rebuilt between entities*. One member said, with support from Board colleagues:

There is potential for the Board to be more effective with an appropriate leader who is willing to be transparent and move forward. That requires a relationship of trust. It also requires RIDE to be more innovative in their role; they are severely understaffed and don't have the right people in the right places. I have hope that the new Commissioner will put a stronger team together.

The Board member then specified what a restart would actually mean: "Starting over means new everything: new teachers, new trainings for teachers. Our buildings are terrible, our food is terrible; we only have one vendor for transportation, one vendor for food – there are a lot of monopolies in Rhode Island, so we are at the mercy of the vendors."





## APPENDIX A

### Review Participants

*The following stakeholders were invited and participated in interviews for this review*

Students

School Principals

Zone Executive Directors

Academic Programming Office Staff

School Culture/Student Supports Office Staff

Special Education/ELL Services Office Staff

Central Office Leadership

Superintendent

Student Registration Office Staff

Office of Multiple Pathways Office Staff

Office of Student Affairs Office Staff

Office of Health, Nursing and PE Office Staff

Family Engagement Staff

Office of Student Supports Office Staff

Office of Finance Staff

Office of Research, Planning and Accountability Staff

Office of Technology Staff

Office of Curriculum and Instruction Staff

School Board Members (All members were invited)

City Council Members (All members were invited)

Business Leaders

- Jeremy Crisp – Nail Communications
- Christopher Graham – Locke Lord
- Lauri Lee – Academy for Career Exploration (ACE)
- Art Norwalk – Norwalk Communications, Inc.
- Janet Raymond – Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce
- John Sinnott – Gilbane, Inc.
- Neil Steinberg – Rhode Island Foundation

School Support Partners

- Highlander
- NE Basecamp
- CYC
- Inspiring Minds
- Center for Resilience

PTU President

- Maribeth Calabro
- Jeremy Sencer

Educator Pipeline Partners

- Kristine Frech
- CLEE
- RIC
- URI
- PC
- RWU

AFT Organized Teachers

- Jeremy Sencer + 5-10 teachers

Student Support Partners

- Providence Student Union
- College Crusade
- College Visions
- Breakthrough Providence

Afterschool/Enrichment

- Hillary Salmons
- Jennie Johnson, Americorps
- Boys and Girls Club of Greater providence
- Down City Design

Key City Staff

- Emily Crowell, Chief of Communications
- Sabrina Solares-Hand, COO
- Ellen Cynar, Director, Health Communities
- Matt Shumate, Deputy Chief of Staff
- Leonela Felix, Deputy Director of Policy

Laborers Local 1033 Staff

AFCSME Local 1339 Staff

Vendor Partners

RIPN and PLEE

## APPENDIX B

### Interviews with Former Superintendent and Mayor

Phone interview with former Superintendent, Dr. Susan Lusi  
May 31, 2019

As former Superintendent of the Providence School System, Dr. Lusi summarized her overall view of the district in the following terms. The situation, she said, “is not our fault but it is our problem to solve.” She said it was “impossible not to acknowledge that Providence has hard working conditions for teachers and, combined with low pay, is a poor place for acquiring talented teachers.”

She added:

The workforce in Providence should reflect the community diversity – the story of Providence is it has failed both the kids and the educators... [There are] insufficient resources and inattention to diversity inclusion and training. Putting money towards this kind of training was not priority; school counselors/psychologists were not a priority....

At the same time, she stressed *multiple impediments to effective action*:

- *Time* – It takes a very, very long time before you could get anything done. Providence serves students who need immediate attention... [there are] too many cooks in the kitchen.
- *Process* - Municipal entanglements need also to be addressed. Through the Compensation Ordinance, the City Council votes on budget and compensation & classification. The bureaucracy would take at least three months to pass ordinances or award contracts, and individuals would just be kept waiting. [She] wanted to hire a Chief of Staff who had authority, and then had to go to the School Board, the Mayor, and the City Council to change the job priorities of the Chief of Staff role so that the person could be effective. This took months and months.
- *RIDE* – [Dr. Lusi was] disappointed that top RIDE leadership never fully understood “our context,” and that there “wasn’t the trust to strategize together.”
- *City Council* – [The] City Council is the main deterrent – structurally, the City Council has no business making [educational] decisions.
- *Laws* – The laws in Rhode Island around collective bargaining go deeper than in other states – the contract pushes money to areas outside of high-quality instruction in the classrooms. (She) never could figure out staffing flexibility for principals... [There was] hardly time to work with teachers or teachers to work with [other] teachers.

- *Patronage* – It is an issue in Providence both in terms of people in power wanting their friends or constituents hired and also in terms of people in power wanting certain children to get into certain schools. This is not limited to people in the City power structure.
- *Autonomy* - The Superintendent of Providence needs the protection, autonomy, and authority to execute on what needs to be done to improve education for children. The Commissioner of Rhode Island needs these conditions as well.
- *Curriculum* – [Dr Lusi believes that] schools should have a high-quality curriculum, but give schools autonomy to modify it to student needs. [But there was] no ownership from central office so no buy in from educators.

Call with former Mayor Angel Taveras  
May 31, 2019

Question: How did you see your role as Mayor, in relation to the school district, school board, and legislature?

- “Ultimately as the one responsible for schools.” But my main job was “to support the Superintendent and get out of her way.”
- “I didn’t micromanage. I tried to hire excellent team members and let them do their job.”
- The Superintendent thanked him for letting her negotiate on the CBA.
- “I knew I had no experience and wanted to bring in people who did.”

Question: What were some signature successes during your tenure? The former Mayor cited the following:

- Providence Talks.
- Bloomberg Philanthropies and Carnegie funding.
- Allowed the superintendent to negotiate the CBA.
- 15-minute longer school days.
- Bringing in Achievement First, and making sure there was a similar demographic to the city at large.

When asked about past challenges and current barriers to success, the former Mayor spoke on background only.